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OUTLAW AND LAWMAKER

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OUTLAW AND LAWMAKER

BY

MRS CAMPBELL PRAED

AUTHOR OF

THE ROMANCE OF A STATION' 'THE SOUL OF COUNTESS ADRIAN' ETC.



IN THREE VOLUMES—VOL. I.

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OUTLAW AND LAWMAKER

CHAPTER I

ELSIE

ANYONE who has travelled through Australia will identify the Leichardt's Land of these pages, though in the map it is called differently, with that colony in which the explorer Leichardt met his tragic fate, and to a part of which he gave his name ; and the same person, if he will examine the map, should have no difficulty in discovering the Luya district, which lies on the southern border of the colony in a bend of the great Dividing Range.

The Luya, in its narrowest part, is fenced

on almost three sides with mountains. Here the country is wild and mostly scrubby, intersected by spurs from the range, and broken by deep ravines and volcanic-looking gorges. There is scarcely any grazing land, and till Goondi Diggings were started, the Upper Luya was spoken of as the most picturesque district in Leichardt's Land, but as offering the least attractions to a settler of any kind. Even the Goondi 'rush' some few years back, though it had for a time let loose a horde of prospectors, did not do much towards populating this particular nook below the Dividing Range. Goondi became a flourishing township and its output of gold continued steadily, but though other goldfields sprang up on the further side of the district, contrary to expectations no gold was discovered on the Luya waters, and prospectors had now given up the useless search. Moreover, Goondi was on the

very edge of the district, across the high-road to the next colony, and beyond lay open country and fine stations for cattle and sheep. Goondi called itself the township for the Luya district, but as a matter of fact the Luya had no especial head-centre. It is a secluded corner hemmed in by mountains, and though at no great distance from the capital of the colony and within easy reach of civilisation, it is cut off by its geographical position from the main current of life and action.

The river which waters the district has its rise in Mount Luya, the highest point of the range, then reputed inaccessible to white men. There are strange fastnesses at the foot of Mount Luya—places where, report still declares, foot of European has never trod. The Blacks have a superstitious reverence, amounting to terror, for this region, and in the aboriginal mythology, if there be indeed

any such, Mount Luya with its grey desolate crags and mysterious fissures, and, on either side, twin-peaked Burrum and Mount Goondi with its ribbed rampart of rock and black impenetrable scrub, might well represent the lair of Demons or the abode of Gods.

A few stray selectors had settled themselves at the head of the Luya on the small flats and wattle ridges that offered a certain scant subsistence for stock. But these selections had, for the most part, a suspicious reputation, as affording a convenient base of operations for cattle-stealing and such nefarious practices. Certainly, one or two of these petty landowners might be credited with strictly honourable intentions, as, for instance, that unprofitable scion of aristocracy, Lord Horace Gage, who, more romantic than practical, had been seduced by the beauty of the scenery and by a keen artistic instinct, as well as by the fasci-

nating prospect of hunting big game in the shape of wild horses, and of starting an industry in hides and horsehair; or a guileless new chum, such as Morres Blake, of Baròlin Gorge, with a certain ironic humour described himself, taken in by an old hand who was eager to dispose to advantage of a property no seasoned bushman would buy. It may be added that Mr. Blake had accepted his bargain with resignation. He turned the Gorge into a nursery for thoroughbred horses, and seldom visited the Luya, leaving the management of affairs there to his working partner, Dominic Trant. Except, however, for these selectors' homesteads, a great part of the Upper Luya belonged to the Hallett Brothers, and made portion of their station Tunimbah—a troublesome bit of country in mustering time, when the broken gorges and undergrowth formed an almost impregnable refuge for 'scrubbers.'

Tunimbah was one of the principal stations on the Luya, and extended beyond this mountainous region to the open country, where was good grazing land, and where the river was no longer a shallow, uncertain stream brawling over miniature precipices, trickling through quicksands, or dropping into a chain of still, deadly-looking pools—except in flood-time, when it had a way of coming down from its source with amazing volume and rapidity. As the mountains widened out the Luya widened and deepened, and flowed quite sedately through wooded pastures and the paddocks of well-kept head stations. Lower down it washed peaceful German plantations and the settlements of cedar-cutters, who floated their logs on its surface to the township, below which it finally emptied itself into the ocean.

Of the squatters on the Upper Luya, the

Hallett Brothers were perhaps the most important, and with the prospect of greater wealth in the future than any others of the settlers in the district. They were young and enterprising, and besides Tunimbah, owned stations out west, which they worked in conjunction with their southern property. Tunimbah was always quoted as the most comfortable and best managed of the Luya stations. Young Mrs. Jem Hallett, the eldest brother's wife, was considered a model housekeeper, and the most dressy woman in the district. She went to Leichardt's Town for the Government House balls, and was a lady not slow to assert her pretensions, social and otherwise. Frank Hallett, the unmarried brother, was popular in the neighbourhood as a capital fellow and a clear-headed man of business. He was particularly popular with ladies, being a good match and a sociable person who got

up races and picnic parties in slack times, and liked to amuse himself and other people, and he was vaguely known in the colony as a man of promise. He had been mentioned in the newspapers and publicly congratulated by the Governor on having taken high honours at the Sydney University, and was considered a person likely to distinguish himself in politics. He had gone through one election, and had been beaten with credit. Since then he had been biding his time and hoping that the Luya constituency might fall vacant. Yesterday there had seemed little prospect of this being the case. Now, in a few moments after the first shock of a tragic disclosure, he saw himself member for Luya, and at no very distant date leader of the Opposition in the Leichardt's Land Assembly.

The disclosure was made by a girl.

The girl was standing on a point of rock

above the steep bank, at what was called Lord Horace's Crossing. Lord Horace's homestead, Luya Dell, lay behind her. The girl was Lord Horace's wife's sister. The crossing was one of Lord Horace's fads.

He had wasted a great deal of money and labour in making it more beautiful than Nature had already done, and that was quite unnecessary, for Nature had not been niggardly in her provisions.

It was a creek flowing down one of the many gorges of Mount Luya. The creeklet ran between high banks, mostly of grey lichen-covered rock—banks which curved in and out, making caves and hollows where ferns, and parasites, and rock lilies, and aromatic-smelling shrubs grew in profusion—banks that sometimes shelved upward, and sometimes hung sheer, and sometimes broke into bastion-like projections or into boulders lying pell-

mell, and it seemed only kept from crashing down by the binding withes of a creeper, or the twisted trunk of a chestnut tree or crooked gum. Then there were mysterious pools with an iridescent film upon their surface, and dank beds of arums, and fallen logs and rugged causeways, and the triumph of Lord Horace's engineering skill—a bridge of unhewn stone that might have been laid in prehistoric ages by some Australian Titan.

The girl stood framed between two great cedars and outlined against a bit of blue sky. Just here there was a gap in the mountains, and a long narrow flat, on the discovery of which Lord Horace prided himself, curved round a projecting bluff and constituted the freehold of Luya Dell. It was Lord Horace who had christened the place. The girl might have postured as a model for some semi-allegoric Australian statue of Liberty.

The cairn of rocks, patched with lichen and the red blossoms of the *Kennedia* creeper, and tufted with fern, made her a suitable pedestal. She was tall, slender, and lithe of limb, with something of the virginal grace and ease of a Diana, and her clinging holland gown was not an altogether un-goddess-like drapery. She had a red merino scarf twisted round her shoulders and waist, and wore a sort of toque of dark crimson upon her trim little head with its tendril fringe in front and knot of brown curling hair behind. Her face was oval in shape, though the features were not exactly classic. At this moment she looked alert and expectant; her dark eyes were dilated and alight, and her red lips were slightly parted in an eager smile. There was a flush on her soft, almost infantine cheek, which was of the warm pale tint of a fruit ripened in the shade. She had one arm

lifted, and beckoned excitedly to Frank Hallett, whose pulses tingled at the sight of her.

‘Stop,’ she cried. ‘I want to talk to you.’

As if there were any power on earth except that she herself wielded which just then would have kept him from stopping and talking to her! He raised his hat, and put spurs to his horse. He did not trust himself to Lord Horace’s bridge, which was in truth intended more for ornament than for use, but splashed through the shallow stream and scrambled up the steep hill. She watched him leaning forward, raised in the saddle, one hand lightly clutching his horse’s mane, his eager face upturned to her. It was an attractive face, bronzed, wholesome, well-featured, with clear eyes frank and straight-looking, a pleasant smile, dark brown whiskers and moustache, and a square-cut, shaven chin.

He looked a typical bushman, with a little more polish than one associates with the typical bushman—had the bushman's seat, and the bushman's sinewy, sapling-like figure.

But the girl did not admire the typical bushman. She would have preferred the product of a more complex civilisation. In this she resembled what indeed she was, the typical Australian girl. She had not a very varied experience of the human product of a complex civilisation. Her reading convinced her that she must not generalise by the specimens that drifted to Australia, and of which her own brother-in-law was an example. When she was in a discontented mood she always brought herself into a state of resignation by reflecting that nothing would have induced her to marry Lord Horace Gage.

‘Of course I might have married him if I

had chosen to cut Ina out,' Elsie Valliant had always said to herself, with the complacent vanity of a spoiled beauty. 'But one must remember that there's honour among thieves, and besides, he is too great a bore for anyone to put up with but Ina, who is a placid angel.'

To be sure, if Lord Horace had been the heir to the marquise, instead of the youngest of many scantily portioned younger sons, Elsie might have altered her mind, for she had the reputation of being a very worldly and a very heartless young lady. At any rate, this was what her rejected admirers declared.

'He really is good-looking,' she thought now, as she watched Frank Hallett. And she added: 'It is such a pity that he is—only Frank Hallett.'

'Tell me, have you met Braile?' she

questioned anxiously, as he pulled up his panting horse and flung himself from the saddle.

‘Braile—the postman? No ; I’ve been out on the run. I left Tunimbah early.’

‘That’s a pity,’ said the girl. ‘He is brimful of news—dying to communicate it to someone. Mrs. Jem will have a benefit when he gets to Tunimbah.’

‘Well, I have no doubt Edith will reward him with an extra glass of grog, and that the mail will be late at Corinda in consequence,’ said Hallett. ‘What has happened?’

‘Braile is never late,’ said the girl, not answering the question. ‘He is wound up to carry the mails, and nothing short of a creek risen past his saddle flaps will stop him. I have a respect for Braile. The way in which he grasped the dramatic points of the situation was most admirable.’

‘What is the situation? You shouldn’t tantalise me. I believe it’s only some joke. Nothing really exciting now—is there?’

Elsie nodded gravely. ‘Enough to excite Braile and Horace, and even Ina—and me. Enough to raise the district and to make you wish you were a bushranger, or the head of police, that you might be in the play-bill too.’

‘Then it’s Moonlight out again. Have they caught him?’

‘It’s Moonlight, and if they had caught him should I say that you would like to be in his place?’

‘I suppose not. Not,’ and the young man reddened and stammered and looked at her in a curious way—‘not if you cared two straws about me.’

He seemed to wait for her reply, but she only stared at the ground, gazing from her lofty position over his head.

‘I wish you’d tell me why in any case I should wish to be Captain Moonlight.’

‘Because he is a hero,’ said the girl.

‘Do you think so? Must one wear a mask and rob one’s neighbours to be a hero?’

The girl made an impatient gesture. ‘You don’t understand. You’ve no romance; you’ve no ideas beyond the eternal cattle. You are quite satisfied to be a bushman—you are more humdrum even than Ina.’

He did not answer for a moment: ‘I am very anxious to know what the news was that old Braile brought. Look here, let me help you down from those rocks. You seem such miles above me. You look as if you had put yourself up for a landmark.’

‘So I did. I thought my red shawl would attract attention. I was trying how far I could see down the Gorge—wondering if anyone were in hiding there, and from how far

they could see me. I was thinking how easy it would be to hide up in Mount Luya, and wondering— She stopped, and then, taking his proffered hand, stepped from the pointed stone on which she had been balancing herself to a lower one, and so till she was on the level beside him. He finished her sentence—

‘Wondering if there was any chance of Moonlight coming along. How should you like to be carried off by him?’

‘On his black horse Abatos?’

‘How do you know that his black horse is called Abatos?’

‘Ah, that’s part of Braile’s story. Moonlight hardly ever speaks, you know. It is the Shadow who conveys his orders and intentions. But that night Moonlight was heard to say one word as he rode towards the coach, and that was “Abatos.”’

‘Why his horse’s name? Why not a new “swear”?’

‘Oh!’ she said with a slight accent of contempt. ‘Ask Horace to lend you his Lempriere.’

Hallett flushed. ‘I am not as ignorant as you think. I had forgotten for the moment. And so you would like to be carried off by the bushrangers?’

‘I think I should like it immensely. I should enjoy the opportunity of talking to Moonlight and his masked henchmen. I shouldn’t be at all afraid of their not treating me in a gentlemanly and considerate manner. Only, you see, I shouldn’t be worth carrying off. Unless Mammie realised on the piano and the sewing-machine—we’ve not a stick else worth twopence—there would be nothing to ransom me with. And anyhow the piano

and the sewing-machine would hardly run to a ransom.'

'Your brother-in-law?' suggested Hallett.

'Poor Horace has telegraphed to *his* brother-in-law. The Bank will come down on the Dell unless Lord Waveryng sends him a thousand pounds at once. Leichardt's Town, and the wedding trip, and the imported bull have cleared him out. No, I should be left to my fate.'

'That seems a melancholy state of things,' said Hallett, with an embarrassed laugh; 'but in the event of such a calamity as your abduction by Moonlight, Miss Valliant, I think there are some of us fellows who wouldn't think twice of selling the last hoof off their runs to buy *you* back.'

The girl laughed too, and blushed. 'Perhaps, after all, I shouldn't want to be

bought back. Now I am going to tell you——’

She seated herself on the lowest boulder of the cairn, and he, holding his horse’s bridle, leaned against the cedar tree and listened.

She began, ‘Goondi coach was stuck up on Thursday night.’

‘Ah! So that’s it. The brutes!’

‘Do you mean the bushrangers? No, they didn’t behave like brutes. Two men against a coachful. Think! Peter Duncan, the millionaire, was on the coach, and Moonlight made him sign a cheque for 2,000*l.*, to be cashed at Goondi Bank.’

‘By Jove!’ exclaimed Hallett. ‘That was cheek. Well, I’m glad it was Peter Duncan. The old miser. He deserves it.’

‘Moonlight only robs people who deserve to lose their money, and the Government, and

the banks, who don't miss it,' went on Elsie imperturbably. 'He protects the widow and the orphan. There was a widow on the coach too. She was an old German woman, and she was hurrying down to Leichardt's Town to say good-bye to her only son. He was to sail in the "Shooting Star," and her only chance of seeing him was by catching the Goondi coach the next morning. She had her savings with her to give him. She offered them all to Moonlight if he would get her into Goondi.'

'And he took them?'

'No,' cried the girl triumphantly. 'He gave them all back to her. Well, Mr. Slaney was in the coach also, and he was in a bad way too. He had got bitten by something, and was blood-poisoned, and he was going to the doctor.'

'Slaney the member?'

'Yes, the member for Luya. Oh, I have

been thinking of something. I'll tell you presently. I'm a wretch, but I can't help it. Who could be sorry for Mr. Slaney ?'

'You don't mean——'

'Wait, wait. I must first prove to you that Moonlight is a hero. He and his Shadow—you know that's what they call the other man—sacked the mail, got Mr. Duncan's cheque, and then tied up the driver and the passengers each to a separate tree, some way off the road. You see, Moonlight's only chance of cashing his cheque was by being at the Goondi Bank directly it opened, before the coach was missed, or the telegraph wires could be set working.'

'I see. It struck me at first that it would have been safer to have had the cheque drawn on the Leichardt's Town Bank ; but of course the other was his wisest plan. Moonlight is a shrewd fellow. Well, Miss Valliant, what is the rest of Braile's story ?'

‘ Ah, now comes the point. Think of the daring ! Moonlight meant to leave the coach and the passengers tied up till someone found them in the morning. The old German woman went on her knees to him and cried about her son. Mr. Slaney offered a cheque for 500*l.* if only he would get the coach to Goondi. Mr. Slaney guessed that he was dying.’

‘ Dying ! ’

‘ Wait. Moonlight refused the cheque, but said that he would take Mr. Slaney’s word. Moonlight and his Shadow had an argument. The Shadow told him he was a fool. It ended in Moonlight having his way. He gave his horse to the Shadow, mounted the box, and drove the coach to within a mile of Goondi, with Mr. Slaney and the German woman, leaving all the others tied up to their respective gum-trees.’

‘ And then ? ’

‘Then day was breaking. Moonlight turned the coach off the road, fastened the horses, and remounted his own. Mr. Slaney was groaning with pain. The coach to Leichardt’s Town, which the German woman wanted to catch, was to start at eight. The Bank opens at nine. You see what a risk it was. Moonlight explained the situation, and told them he would trust to their honour. He showed the German woman a cross-cut by which she could meet the down coach outside Goondi. Mr. Slaney gave his word that he would not give information to the police, and walked on to Goondi straight to the doctor’s house. Moonlight waited——’

Elsie paused dramatically.

‘How do you know all these details?’ asked Hallett, struck by the vivid way in which the girl told her story.

‘Mr. Slaney told the doctor afterwards.

Braile had got the particulars at Goondi. And it is easy enough to fill in from one's imagination. I have been thinking of nothing else all day. I have been picturing Moonlight nerving himself to walk into the Bank, not knowing whether a policeman would be there to take him. It seems to me a brave thing to have staked one's liberty on the honour of a poor old German woman and Mr. Slaney.'

'They were true to him?'

'Yes. At nine o'clock, when the Bank opened, a very respectably got-up and quiet-looking bushman went in and presented Mr. Duncan's cheque, which he said had been paid him for a mob of store cattle. The Bank cashed it without question. Two hours afterwards it was all over the place that the Goondi coach had been stuck up, and Mr. Duncan bled of 2,000*l*. But Moonlight and

his Shadow and the respectably dressed bushman had disappeared.'

'And Mr. Slaney?' asked Frank Hallett

'Mr. Slaney,' repeated Elsie solemnly. 'Ah, this is what concerns you. The member for Luya died early this morning.'

CHAPTER II

THE LEGEND OF BARÒLIN

‘AH!’ Frank Hallett drew a long breath and stood in silent thought for a minute or more, Elsie watching him all the time saying nothing. The interest, half indignant, half admiring, and with a dash of the humorous in it, which Elsie’s account of the sticking-up of the Goondi coach and the robbery of the miser-millionaire had excited, faded suddenly, and gave way to a more personal and absorbing excitement. Moonlight’s depredations were certainly a mystery and a shame to the district, and to a Government which was supposed to protect the property of peaceable colonists. But the Luya squatters had got

into a way of looking upon Moonlight's misdeeds as not calling for very serious vengeance. He did not bail up their stations or steal their valuable cattle and horses, or frighten helpless women or respected inhabitants. There was, indeed, a certain odd chivalry and dare-devilry of the Claude Duval kind in this masked miscreant with the soft voice and courteous manners, who flashed out on moonlight nights to stick up a gold escort and then disappeared into the bowels of the earth, as it seemed, or into the thickets of Baròlin Scrub. It was Moonlight's picturesqueness which appealed to the romantic element in more prosaic natures than that of Elsie Valliant. If truth were told, Frank Hallett was not inclined to judge too harshly a bandit who, granted that he robbed, robbed 'on the square.' No, it was not of Moonlight that he was thinking, but of the fact suddenly

borne in upon him that Mr. Slaney's removal threw open the constituency of the Luya, and assured him of the opportunity for which he had been waiting in order to begin his chosen career. In a flash he grasped the personal significance of Elsie Valliant's words. The member for Luya was dead. He himself might now be the member for Luya.

At the same moment a pang of remorse shot through him, remorse that he could so allow himself to speculate on the beneficial results to himself of a fellow-creature's death. But it was not in human nature that he could feel more than a passing pang. Mr. Slaney, though the chosen of the electorate, and the possessor of certain good qualities, as the Moonlight episode showed, was almost as unpopular in the district at large as the miser Duncan, whom everybody hated. Slaney had got into the Legislative Assembly on a reactionary wave,

and through the vote of the Irish population on the Diggings. To Frank Hallett he had been privately and publicly obnoxious, and they had had more than one encounter, not wholly of a political nature. Slaney had kept a bush inn, and had made his money, people said, by doctoring the grog. He was a queer, cross-grained person, given to hard drinking, and with his blood in the condition in which a bite from a horsefly might prove a fatal poison. Everyone knew that he would not be returned a second time, and everyone said that Frank Hallett's election, should the seat become vacant, was a certainty. In a quick prophetic glance the young man saw himself in the position which he coveted—the leader of a party—a future premier of Leichardt's Land, a public personage whom the most ambitious girl in Australia might be content to own as her lover.

Then, with a thrill of triumph, he realised that Elsie too must have grasped this point in the situation, and he saw that she had worked her narrative up to it with a distinct appreciation of its dramatic importance. She had waited for him at the Crossing that she might be the first to tell him the news. From this he must infer that she was interested in him—Frank Hallett—and not in the feats of Moonlight, and, as she phrased it, the ‘raising of the district.’ She was interested in the way in which he would take the information—in the bearing of the incident on his future fortunes, with which, perhaps, she already identified herself. She had divined his secret ambition. Might it not well be that she had divined another ambition dearer and more secret still?

His breath came and went fast in the agitation of his fancied discovery and eager-

rushing hope. He had been looking away beyond the Crossing. Now he turned to her, and became aware that she was watching him. In an instant there was the shock of a recoil. The sweet indifference of her gaze, the mere friendly curiosity, the slight touch of feminine coquetry in her smile, checked all his ardour and made him draw back and pull himself together as though he had been hurt. He said, very quietly,

‘It is you who have grasped the dramatic points of the situation, Miss Valliant. I think you must have been giving Braille lessons.’

She looked away from him and back again quickly.

‘It interested me,’ she said. ‘I am interested in Moonlight. I should like very much to see him. But,’ she added with a little laugh, ‘even if he carried me off, as you suggested, I shouldn’t get a sight of his face.’

They say no one has ever seen him without his mask.'

'Perhaps he doesn't wear it in his hiding-place,' said Frank. 'I am sorry for Slaney,' he went on in the same dulled tone. 'And I am glad he kept his promise to Moonlight. I shall always think better of him for that. Yes—I am sorry—though——' He paused.

'Well?' she said, 'though——?'

'Though, of course, his death gives me a chance of standing for the Luya. Not that it matters so much. I should have got in for the northern district.'

'But this will be much nicer,' said she demurely. 'You won't have to go away on electioneering tours, and being our own especial member, we shall have a right to order you about and to be interested in your general career.'

'Shall you really be interested in my

career ? ' he asked, bending a little towards her. She looked at him, letting her big brown eyes rest full on his for a moment or two.

‘ Why, yes, naturally, and as far as we are concerned, I assure you your duties as member of Parliament will be no sinecure. When I na, and Horace, and I want anything from the Government—such as a mail twice a week, or a railway to the Luya, or any little trifle of that sort—we shall expect you to make a fuss about it in the House. And then if the Governor does not give balls enough you will be responsible for not voting a sufficient entertaining allowance. And, of course, when you become a Cabinet Minister we shall want you to look after us at the public functions—find us seats in the special saloon Government carriage when there’s a show or a railway opening. And we shall want to be asked to all the Government picnics down the bay. Oh, and

I must insist on a seat on the dais—and no one looking askance at me as though I had no right to be there—at the Mayor's ball. And I always did want to be a Minister's wife, so that the usher of the Black Rod might take me to my place at the Opening of Parliament.'

'One might suggest, perhaps, that an opportunity may present itself of securing these advantages,' said Hallett grimly.

'How?'

'Why——' Hallett reddened and stammered, abashed by her clear gaze. 'It would not be so difficult to marry a Minister, would it?'

'Wouldn't it? But there doesn't happen at present to be an unmarried member of the Executive. Still, as you suggest, one may live in hope. There will be new politicians coming on, and I may have a chance yet.

I will wait for a change of Ministry. Then your party will be in—and *you* may be in too.'

Her laugh, which was innocent and frank as that of a child, robbed her speech of its audacious coquetry. Elsie said things which no other girl could have said without incurring the charge of being unmaidenly. No one would ever have called Elsie unmaidenly, though they might have called her, and with a good show of reason, an unprincipled flirt, and in spite of her freedom of manner no man would have ventured upon an impertinence towards this young lady, who knew very well upon occasion how to maintain her dignity.

'You are laughing at me,' exclaimed Frank Hallett in a hurt tone. 'You don't think it is in me to become a leader. Well, we shall see. Yes, Miss Valliant, that's my ambition and my intention. I mean to be a political leader, and I think that if a man has

pluck and perseverance and a certain amount of brains, as well as a certain amount of money to make him independent of place, he is bound to get to the front and to make a position that he wouldn't be ashamed to offer to a woman he cared for.' The young man's voice shook. 'I think that before very long I shall be on the Ministerial bench, or at any rate in the front rank of the Opposition, and when that day comes I shall ask you for your congratulations.'

'And no one will give them with a more sincere heart than I,' said Elsie gravely. 'And you didn't understand me, Mr. Hallett. I never meant to laugh at you, or to doubt you. Oh, I know well enough that you are considered a coming man. Mamma, and Ina, and Horace, and heaps of other people have told me that of you.'

She stopped and blushed. She knew,

though Frank did not, why she in particular had had all Frank's advantageous prospects impressed upon her. Oh, of course, he would be a very good match for a penniless Leichardt's Town belle, and her mother knew it, and Lord Horace, and Ina, and all the rest of their world knew it too.

‘Thank you for saying that, Elsie! If you only knew——’ the young man began passionately. He came a step nearer her, but Elsie moved and put out her hand in a half laughing, half rebuking manner.

‘But I don't know, and perhaps I don't want to know—there, never mind. . . . I want you to tell me something——’

‘Tell you—what?’

‘Oh, it's nothing—only——’

‘Tell me,’ she went on with the slightest confidential movement. ‘I'm so interested in Moonlight. Do you think it is true—what

they say—that he has some secret hiding-place under Mount Luya?’

‘How can I know, and why should I care?’ exclaimed Hallett exasperated.

‘I should have thought you would care, that you might have some idea if there really is such a hiding-place, for you are always about on the run, and they say no one knows the Upper Luya as well as you do.’

‘There might be any sort of cave or hiding-place up in the gorges by Baròlin Scrub. Cattle don’t go there—except the regular scrubbers that it is no use trying to get at. They used to hunt there for gold. One of these prospecting chaps would have been more likely to come across it, or the Blacks——’

‘Oh, but there’s a Black’s legend,’ said Elsie eagerly.

‘If you are going to make a legend out

of a Black's tale about the Bunyip or Debil-debil——!' he said contemptuously.

'It is a legend, and quite a respectable one. Yoolaman Tommy—King Tommy, you know—told me. He says that close to Baròlin Waterfall at the back there is another smaller waterfall, and beside it a huge black rock which is shaped like a man's head, with long grey moss growing upon it, so that it looks as if it were a very old black man with grey hair and a beard. Have you ever seen it?'

'No, Baròlin Waterfall is a *cul-de-sac*. The water is supposed to come from the lake on the top of the mountain, and the precipice cuts the mountain. They say the lake is the crater of an extinct volcano.'

'Let us make a picnic there sometime, and try to find old Baròlin—the Old Man of the Mountain. Do.'

'You couldn't do it. I have never got to

the waterfall myself, and I'm a pretty good rider, and Pioneer as safe a horse in rough country as you'd find on the Luya.'

Frank Hallett patted the big powerful bay, who turned from rubbing his cheek against the cedar-tree as if he knew that he was being talked about.

'We might ride as far as we could, and walk the rest of the way,' said Elsie.

'Walk five miles over the Luya rocks and through Baròlin Scrub! There wouldn't be much left of you, Miss Valliant.'

'I am determined that somehow or other I will see Baròlin,' said Elsie, with the wilfulness of a spoilt child. 'Perhaps you don't know why the scrub and the waterfall are called Baròlin?'

'Did King Tommy tell you?'

'King Tommy told me that the white-haired old man was once a great chief who

lived in Mount Luya, and was a mighty man of war, against whom none of the other chiefs could stand. He got so powerful that he offended the great spirit Yoolatanah, and Yoolatanah turned him into a rock and shut him up behind the waterfall, which was called after him, Baròlin. The Blacks say that he sleeps, and only wakes when someone goes near the fall. Then he seizes them, and they are never seen or heard of again. So the Blacks will not go near Baròlin or enter the scrub even at bunya time.'

'I thought it was the Bunyip,' said Hallett laughing. 'I know none of the Blacks will go near Baròlin. They always say "Debil-debil sit down there," and as there are any amount of bnyas in the scrub and none to speak of anywhere else, this superstition must be a pretty powerful one.'

At that moment an Alpine call sounded

from the other side of the creek. Elsie got up. 'That's Horace. Now we shall hear something more about Moonlight.'

'Why are you so interested in Moonlight?' asked Hallett jealously.

'I have told you. Because he is a hero. Horace—Horace; have they caught Moonlight?'

CHAPTER III

LORD AND LADY HORACE AT HOME

LORD HORACE was scrambling up the bank, leaning well over his saddle bow and clinging to his horse's mane. His seat was a little uncertain, and it was evident that he was only a spurious sort of bushman, in spite of his rather elaborate bush get-up of Crimean shirt, spotless moleskins, and expensive cabbage-tree hat. He had a stockwhip, too, coiled over his left arm, though he had made no pretence of going after cattle, and had indeed only a few stray beasts to go after. He was a tall, slight, dark young man, with a profile somewhat after the Apollo Belvedere type, fine eyes, and a weak mouth. He was distinctly aristocratic-

looking, clipped his g's after the English aristocratic fashion, and had certain little ways of his class, in spite of his efforts to be rough. He had an attractive manner, and apart from his wish to ape bushmen's habits, seemed quite without affectation. He looked, certainly, however, more suited for a London life than for that of an Australian settler, and it was equally certain from his physiognomy that he would never take the world by storm with his talents.

‘Moonlight!’ he cried out in answer to Elsie’s question. ‘Been huntin’ for him all up the Luya. No chance whatever of their findin’ him. I say, Hallett, how do you do, old chap? Let’s make a party—get some good black trackers, don’t you know? and go out on the trail, eh?—man-catching. It would be rare sport.’

If you and Mr. Hallett were to do such a

thing I'd never speak to you again,' said Elsie indignantly.

'Look here, she has been ravin' about the fellow. I must say I think it was rather a fine thing refusing Slaney's cheque, and trusting to his honour. Slaney's honour! Poor chap, he's dead, so mustn't abuse him. You should have heard the fellows at the "Beantree" discussing your chances, Hallett. I suppose you are going to stand for the district?'

'I suppose so,' Hallett answered. 'But,' he added, 'it is too soon to talk about that, with poor Slaney not yet in his grave.'

'Oh, nobody cares about Slaney. The king is dead, long live the king—that's my motto, and Slaney was a confounded Radical, hand and glove with the working-man. I'm a working-man myself, but I ain't a Radical.' Lord Horace talked excitedly and rather

thickly. Elsie looked at him, and drew her delicate eyebrows together in a frown.

‘I think we had better walk on to the Humpey,’ she said ; ‘Ina will be wondering what has become of us all.’

‘Yes, come along, and have a refresher, and talk over things,’ said Lord Horace. ‘It’s a beastly ride from the “Bean-tree.” I went over to see if some of those selectors wouldn’t get their meat from me—might as well turn an honest penny, you know ; and I wanted to hear the news about Moonlight. Macpherson and his men are mad at his having given them the slip, and are scouring the country till they find his hiding-place. They’re mad, too, against poor Slaney, for not letting them nab Moonlight at the Bank. By Jove, that was a neat trick, and I like old Slaney, though he *was* a beast. I like him for havin’ stood on the square to Moonlight.

But come along, and let us talk it over. It's canvassin' I'm thinking of. I canvassed once for my brother-in-law Waveryng—before he was Waveryng, you know—got him in, too, with singing comic songs—I'm first-rate at 'em. By Jove, Waveryng isn't half as grateful as he might be, or he'd do something for me now.'

Lord Horace spurred his horse and cantered on, executing a series of Alpine calls, to which there came a response from the house in the shape of a faint 'Coo—ee.'

Frank Hallett did not mount, but walked beside Elsie, who was silent and looked worried.

'I forgot,' said Frank abruptly, 'I've got a note for you from Mrs. Jem. She wants you to come over next week, and Lady Horace, of course. I believe there's to be a dance or something at Tunimbah.'

‘I’m going home next week,’ said Elsie.

‘But you can wait for that. Nobody wants you in Leichardt’s Town.’

‘Heaps of people want me, and heaps of things. Mamma wants me; my winter gowns want me, and the fruit wants me. It has to be made into jam, and my dresses have to be made; there’s nobody to do them but me. You see Ina used to be the practical person among us—the Prime Minister, the dress-maker, and the cook all in one. And now Ina is gone.’

‘Oh, but haven’t you——?’ Frank began, and stopped awkwardly.

‘Haven’t we a cook? you were going to say. No, we haven’t. Mammie and I do the cooking for each other, and a nice mess we make of it, and the Kanaka boy who does the garden cleans the pots and pans. Now you know all about it. Have you any idea, Mr.

Hallett, what mammie and I have to live upon ?’

‘No—that is, I didn’t imagine, of course, that you were millionaires.’

‘We’ve got exactly one hundred and twenty-five pounds a year, not counting the garden produce—a hundred and twenty-five pounds a year to pay our rent, and to feed and clothe our two selves, and buy all the necessaries of civilisation. I suppose I pass as a civilised young person out in Australia, though I am quite sure I shouldn’t if you put me down in London society. Oh, dear, I wonder if I shall ever have a taste of London society ?’

‘How you always harp on England,’ said young Hallett.

‘Well, isn’t it supposed to be the Paradise of Australian girls, as they used to say Paris was to Americans? I’m certain that one of

the reasons Ina married Horace was because she thought he might take her to England. I can't imagine any other.'

Frank laughed. 'Oh, he's a very good fellow, though he *is* a lord, as they say about here. But why do you say that your sister married him because she wanted to go to England? She is not ambitious, she doesn't care about that sort of thing. She is not——'

'Not like me,' Elsie interrupted. 'If I were only half as good as Ina!'

'She married him, I suppose, because she loved him,' Hallett went on uneasily.

'Do you think he is the kind of person a girl would fall in love with?' said Elsie.

'Why not? He is very handsome, and he has nice manners.'

'And he is horribly selfish, and he is shallow—as shallow as the creek at the

Crossing. Mr. Hallett, do you know I am worried about Ina. I don't think, somehow, she is very happy. But she is much too proud and much too good to own it.'

Hallett looked uncomfortable. His memory went back to a certain day not many months back—a day when he had confided to Ina Valliant the love he felt for her sister Elsie, and of which he never could think without a painful twinge, a horrible suspicion that she had once cared for him herself. It was true he had no reason for the suspicion—nothing but a stifled exclamation, a quiver of the voice, a sudden paling. The suspicion had been joyfully lulled to sleep, when a month or so afterwards she had accepted Lord Horace, and when she had told him again, and this time firmly and unfalteringly, that she would do everything in her power to further his suit with Elsie. And she had done everything

she could. She had asked him over repeatedly, had been sweet, frank, and sister-like, and had seemed absolutely satisfied. And yet when Elsie said that Ina was not happy, he knew that she was only echoing his own miserable thought.

‘Tell me,’ he said, ‘why do you fancy that? Isn’t he good to her?’

‘Oh, yes. He is always making love to her, if you call that being good. It is really quite embarrassing sometimes, and if I were Ina I wouldn’t have it. And then he flies out because the dinner isn’t quite right, or because some little stupidity is wrong, and sulks like a spoiled child. It’s because Ina doesn’t sulk too—because she puts up with his pettishness so angelically, and takes such pains that everything shall be right next time—that I am sure she isn’t happy. It’s unnatural.’

‘Surely it’s very natural if she cares for him.’

‘Poor Ina,’ said Elsie softly. ‘Well, she is happy enough, apparently, when she is fidgeting after the chickens and furbishing up her doll’s house.’

‘It does look a little like a bush doll’s house,’ said Frank.

They were close to the Humpey now. It was a queer little slab place, roofed with bark, standing against a background of white gum-trees, which, with their tall, ghost-like trunks and sad grey foliage, gave a suggestion of dreariness and desolation to the otherwise cosy homestead. Lord Horace had made the best of the Humpey. It had been a stock-man’s hut, two slab rooms and a lean-to ; and now another hut had been joined to it, which was Lord Horace’s kitchen, and there were sundry other lean-to’s and straggling shanties

which served for guest-rooms and meat-stores. The verandah of the Humpey had an earthen floor, and the posts were of barked saplings. But there were creepers growing around the posts and festooning the bark roof, and there were stands of ferns against the slab walls, and squatters' chairs with crimson cushions which made splashes of colour. Lord Horace's chair had a glass of some spirituous concoction on its arm-table, which his attentive wife had just brought to him, and he was filling his pipe, while Ina, who was only a few degrees less lovely than Elsie, leaned against the post, and waited submissively to be told the day's news. Lord Horace took a great deal of credit to himself for having left the Humpey in its original state of roughness. 'Some fellows, you know, would have gone to no end of expense in cartin' cedar, and shinglin', and paintin', and spoilin' a really

good Australian effect,' he was wont to say. 'That's the worst of you Australians, you've got no sense of dramatic fitness. And that's what I say to Ina and Elsie, when they want me to fill up the chinks between the slabs, and put in plate-glass windows. A bush hut *is* a bush hut, and there's something barbarous in the idea of turning it into a villa. Wait till I've finished my stone house. Then you shall see something really comfortable and harmonious too. In the meantime, if we can't be comfortable, let us at least be artistic.'

Those were Lord Horace's sentiments.

The new house had come to a standstill for want of funds after the foundations had been laid, and it was not likely to get beyond the foundations, unless Lord Waveryng sent out further supplies ; but Lord Horace talked of it with as proud a certainty as if an army of master builders were already at work.

Lady Horace came slowly down the log steps, and held out her hand to Hallett.

‘How do you do,’ she said, in her gentle little Australian drawl. ‘I’m very glad you have come. Elsie was saying yesterday that we were so dull.’

‘That’s because we’re on our honeymoon yet,’ put in Lord Horace. ‘Elsie says it’s quite disgusting the way we spoon.’

Frank Hallett noticed that Lady Horace flushed a brilliant red, and interpreted the blush as a favourable sign. Oh yes, she was happy. She must be happy. If she had not been happy she could not have answered so composedly.

‘We were planning to take Elsie over to Tunimbah to see Mrs. Jem Hallett, before she goes down to Leichardt’s Town. But we’re a little frightened of Mrs. Jem, because she is so dreadfully grand, and she might be vexed if we went without a formal invitation.’

‘ Here is the formal invitation, anyhow,’ said Hallett, and he produced his sister-in-law’s note, and gave it to Lady Horace, who duly handed it to her husband, and it was there and then settled that they would go.

Frank Hallett had brought something else for Ina—some of the famous Tunimbah figs, which were now going off, and he had brought a book for Elsie, and while these offerings were being unpacked and commented on, he studied Lady Horace’s face. Ina was not so pretty as her sister. She was not so tall, her colouring was less brilliant, she was much quieter. It was a wonder, people thought, that Lord Horace, who was a fastidious person, had fallen in love with her instead of with the all-conquering Elsie. But Elsie had snubbed him, and Ina was besides very pretty and very much more docile than her sister. She

had a sweet little serious face, with a peculiarly delicate complexion, and a tender resolute mouth. The fault of her face lay in the light eyelashes and eyebrows, which gave her a certain insipidity. She had a very gentle manner, and she did not talk much, not nearly as much as Elsie.

She had been only four months married. Hallett asked her how she liked the Dell, and she told him in her child-like way all about her chickens, and her pigs, and the new garden, and the pump Lord Horace was making, and other domestic details. And she asked him various questions about the working of Tunimbah and Mrs. Jem Hallett's management, which showed that she had thrown herself entirely into her bush life.

He said something to this effect.

‘Yes,’ she answered. ‘I want to make the Dell as much a model of a place in its small

way as Tunimbah is in its big way. And then, you know, Horace isn't like a regular bushman, he must have his little English comforts——'

'Which he insists on combining with his Australian dramatic effects,' put in Hallett, 'and that must make management a little difficult for you, Lady Horace.'

Ina laughed. 'Oh, I don't mind,' she said. 'Now I want to show you the last improvement,' and she took him into the sitting-room, which was a very cosy and picturesque place, though the walls were only of canvas stretched over the slabs, and the ceiling, of canvas too, was stained with rain droppings from the bark roof. Lord Horace had been amusing himself by drawing in sepia a boldly designed flight of swallows along one end of the room.

'Not strictly appropriate to Australia, my dear fellow, but I couldn't stand the papers

they showed me. I have sent home for something a little more artistic. It should be parrots, of course, or satin-birds—and by the way, those beggars of satin-birds have gobbled up all our loquats—but my imagination wouldn't soar, and Ina is not inventive. I'm trainin' her faculties, but by slow degrees.'

Ina flushed again. Between the flushes she was—so Hallett noticed—alarmingly pale. And surely she had got thinner. But she had taken ever so much pains over the arrangement of the drawing-room, which was in truth exceedingly pretty and full of English odds and ends, from a portrait of Lady Waveryng in full court-dress to an antlered stag's head over the doorway. Ina was proud of her charming room, though she gave Elsie all the credit of the arrangement. 'It was always Elsie who did the prettinesses,' she said, 'whether it was in our ball dresses or

our parlour. Elsie has only to put her hand to a thing and it gets somehow the stamp of herself. I was never good for anything but the useful things.'

Lord Horace sat down to the piano, which was a fine instrument and was littered with music, and struck a few chords. 'You must hear my newest thing. It's one of those spirited bush ballads of William Sharp's, and I've set it to music. Ina and I sat up till all hours last night practisin' it.'

'Yes,' interjected Elsie, 'and you made poor Ina faint by keeping her standing so long.'

'I wanted her to have some port wine,' answered Lord Horace, 'and she wouldn't. It was her fault, wasn't it, Ina, dear?'

'Yes, it was my fault,' said Ina. 'I didn't take the port wine in time.'

'Well, never mind,' said Lord Horace,

‘she shall have some port wine now to make up.’ He rushed off and brought the wine, which he made her swallow in spite of her protests. That was Lord Horace’s way. A glass of port wine for a woman, and a brandy and soda for a man, were his notions of a panacea for ills of body and mind. When Ina had drunk her wine he began his accompaniment again and burst into the song. He had a fair baritone, and sang with a certain manner as of one who knew what he was about. He put a good deal of dramatic go into the rattling words—

‘O’er the range and down the gully, across the river bed,
We are riding on the tracks of the cattle that have fled :
The mopokes all are laughing, and the cockatoos are
screaming,
And bright amidst the stringy barks the parrakeets are
gleaming ;
The wattle blooms are fragrant, and the great mangolias fair
Make a heavy sleepy sweetness in the hazy morning air ;
But the rattle and the crashing of our horses’ hoofs ring
out,
And the cheery sound we answer with our long-repeated
shout.’

And then came the chorus, which the four took up :

‘Coo-ee—Coo-ee—Coo-ee—Coo-ee!’

‘My dear Horace,’ said Hallett, ‘why didn’t you try for fortune in the light operatic line? You are much better suited for that than for roughing it in Australia.’

‘I did think of it,’ replied Lord Horace seriously; ‘but the light operatic line is played out in England, there’s no chance for anybody now. And then one’s people would have thought it *infra dig*. They’re old-fashioned, you know—don’t go in for modern innovations—the stage cult and that sort of thing. It’s not a bad notion of yours, though—an opera of bush life—openin’ chorus of stockmen and bushrangers, and Moonlight for a hero. It might pay better than free-selecting on the Luya.’

‘It might well do that,’ said Elsie, who

was rather fond of a passage-at-arms with her brother-in-law.

Lord Horace caught her round the waist and gave her a twirl or two into the verandah. 'A waltz—a waltz, Ina!' he cried. Ina played. There were some blacks outside who clapped their hands and cried out 'Budgery!' and the pair stopped to have what Lord Horace called a 'yabber.' Hallett and Ina were left alone. She let her hands fall from the piano, and her sweet serious eyes met his. 'Mr. Hallett,' she said, 'I think you ought to make haste.'

'Tell me what I ought to do, Lady Horace.'

'I think you ought to make Elsie understand how much you care for her.'

'I have tried to do that. You were wrong. She doesn't care for me.'

'I thought she did,' said Ina faltering.

The break in her voice reminded him of the break in it *that* day. Perhaps she was thinking of this too. She went on in a different tone: 'You must not judge Elsie as you would another girl. She is horribly proud, and she is horribly reserved, and she is horribly perverse. Oh, I know all my Elsie's faults.'

'Tell me, Lady Horace, what made you think that she cared for me?'

Ina hesitated, and her soft colour came again. 'I don't think I can do that quite, Mr. Hallett.'

'Tell me,' he urged.

She looked at him and turned away her head. 'Yes, I'll tell you,' she said, in a forced sort of voice. 'It was—do you remember that day at Tunimbah—before I was engaged?—when you told me that you were so fond of Elsie.'

‘ Yes,’ he answered, and his voice, too, was strained.

‘ It was just after that, that Horace—that I began to think I might marry Horace. One day, when Elsie teased me about it—she never cared very much for Horace, you know, though Mammie liked him so much—we spoke of you—and Elsie told me that you were the only man she had ever known whom she could fancy herself marrying. She told me that she had once fancied—before Horace came on the scene, you know ’—Ina laughed a little unsteadily—‘ that you had a—a regard for me. It was absurd, wasn’t it?—and that the idea had made her unhappy and snappish to me, and that she had hated herself for minding. But she had minded. That meant a great deal from Elsie.’

At that moment Lord Horace and Elsie came in.

‘Mr. Hallett,’ she exclaimed, ‘I have been telling Horace that we are to have a picnic from Tunimbah to the Baròlin Waterfall.’

‘Elsie is determined to find Moonlight’s lair,’ said Lord Horace. ‘Well, I’m on for any fun of that sort. Talking of Baròlin, do you know the people there, Trant & Co.?’

‘Blake & Trant,’ said Hallett. ‘It’s Blake who is the boss, they say. But how anyone who wasn’t quite a fool could have bought Baròlin Gorge!’

‘They say Trant is doing a good thing with his horses, though,’ said Lord Horace. ‘Do you know the chap? He was at the “Bean-tree” to-day. I didn’t fancy him. Looked to me like one of those low-bred half-Fenian fellows. I saw ’em when I went salmon fishin’ with Waveryng to Ireland. I was wondering whether Blake could be one of the Blakes of Coola.’

‘Coola?’ repeated Hallett.

‘Blake of Coola is about as old a name as there is in Ireland. Castle Coola was close by our river. Lord Coola was a friend of Waveryng’s. I never met him. The Castle was shut up the only time I went over. It is a common enough name though.’

‘I believe my sister-in-law has asked Mr. Trant over to Tunimbah,’ said Hallett.

The bell rang for dressing. Lord Horace took his guest over to what was by courtesy called the Bachelors’ Quarters. There was only one spare room in the Humpey, and that was occupied by Elsie Valliant.

CHAPTER IV

ELSIE'S LOVER

THEY were sitting down to dinner when the barking of the dogs announced an arrival. Presently the woman in the kitchen came in with a slip of paper, on which was written: 'Dominic Trant, of Baròlin.'

'By Jove!' exclaimed Lord Horace, 'he has taken me at my word! Saw him at the "Bean-tree" to-day, and asked him to look us up if he was passing. He said he was going straight on to-night.'

Elsie looked excited. 'Dominic Trant! Dominic—what an odd name!'

Lord Horace brought his guest in. Mr. Trant was rather a good-looking man of from

thirty to thirty-five. Elsie decided, first, that he was distinctly Irish ; secondly, that he was not quite a gentleman. If he had been a gentleman he might have sat for one of Velasquez's pictures, but there was a certain commonness about him which destroyed the effect of his otherwise artistic appearance. He had an accent, too, and Elsie detested a brogue. But he had fine black eyes and a well-featured sallow face. His manner was rather second-rate. He called Lady Horace 'Your Ladyship,' but after the first time or two dropped into familiarity, and was almost free and easy. He scarcely took his eyes off Elsie.

He explained his arrival. He had stopped late at the 'Bean-tree,' later than he had intended. The fact was, he had waited for a telegram from his partner Blake, who was thinking of coming up to Baròlin.

‘Your partner doesn’t pay many visits to Baròlin,’ said Frank Hallett.

‘Well, no,’ replied Mr. Trant. ‘Blake was rather taken in over Baròlin, that’s the truth. He was disgusted, and turned the whole shop over to me. It’s a fiddling little place is Baròlin, and dull as ditchwater.’

‘I expect it will be livelier now that the police are turning out on the Upper Luya to hunt for Moonlight,’ said Lord Horace.

‘Oh, Moonlight!’ said Mr. Trant with a laugh. ‘Do ye think they’ll catch him?’

‘They won’t, unless the squatters lend a hand,’ said Hallett; ‘and it’s a queer thing, but the squatters don’t seem so down on Moonlight as you’d suppose. He hasn’t bailed up any of them yet.’

‘They’ll not catch him,’ said Mr. Trant. ‘Anyhow, I’ll lend ’em a hand at it.’

Elsie looked at him with an expression of dislike. Trant, whose eyes met hers, noticed it, and coloured. 'You don't want him to be caught, Miss?' he said.

'No,' said Elsie decidedly. 'He is a picturesque figure. We haven't much that is picturesque in the bush.'

'Surely,' said Lady Horace, 'we can be picturesque without bushrangers.'

The talk went on about Moonlight. Lord Horace got excited. 'A man hunt.' That was what he wanted. Big game! You needed sportsmen to take the thing up properly. The police were duffers. And now that there was going to be an election no one would bother about Moonlight. Frank Hallett would be responsible if any of the Luya stations were bailed up.

Mr. Trant looked interested. He turned the conversation on to the election, and they

discussed the probability of the Irish vote carrying it in favour of the Radical member. He asked a good many questions as to the strength of the Irish vote, the predominance of Radicalism among the Goondi diggers, and the political leanings of the Luya selectors. Hallett fancied that the man meant to draw him, and showed Mr. Trant that he did not intend to be drawn.

Elsie also scenting Trant's motive, though she could not account for it—surely he could not be thinking of opposing Hallett—plunged into the talk. She had hitherto been very silent.

‘Do you ever go to Leichardt's Town, Mr. Trant?—to the balls, I mean?’

Trant looked at her admiringly from under his heavy brows. ‘I leave that kind of thing to my partner, Miss Valliant. He is more of a ladies' man than I am. Perhaps,’

he added, 'I've never had any great inducement till now to stay in Leichardt's Town.'

'I have never met Mr. Blake,' said Elsie, ignoring the implied compliment.

'Blake goes across the border when he wants a spree,' answered Mr. Trant. 'He runs down to Sydney, and he is rather a card there, I can tell you. I shouldn't wonder, though, if he were in Leichardt's Town a good deal this winter.'

'It is going to be a very gay winter, isn't it?' put in Lady Horace. 'The Prince is really coming, and there will be the new Governor, and we shall have a lot of balls. Elsie and I are going to have a good time—just like the old times, before I married.'

She got up as she spoke and went into the parlour. The night was warm, as March nights are, and there floated in the fragrance of the stephanotis, which twined one of the

verandah posts. Elsie sauntered into the verandah. Lady Horace was going to follow her, but when she saw that Hallett had come out of the dining-room, evidently with that intention, leaving Lord Horace and Mr. Trant, she drew back and let Hallett pass her.

Elsie had gathered a spray of the stephanotis, and was stroking her lip with one of the waxen flowers.

‘How do you like Mr. Trant?’ asked Hallett abruptly.

‘I don’t like him at all,’ she answered. ‘I hate a man who calls me “Miss” and looks at me in that fashion.’

‘I am sorry that Edith asked him to Tunimbah.’

‘Why did she do that?’

‘She said we had been unneighbourly, and that she had heard Mr. Blake was a very charming man, and that for his sake we were

bound to be civil to his partner. You know Edith rather likes to play the part of great lady of the district.'

'She does it very nicely. She is so amiable and proper, and well dressed, and well read, and all the rest. She always says the right thing when she is in society. Do you know, I think Mrs. Jem Hallett is rather wasted as the wife of a Luya squatter.'

'I see you don't like Edith. But, never mind. You will come over, won't you, and leave the jam to take care of itself for another week?'

'I will come on one condition.'

'What is that?'

'That you take me to Baròlin Waterfall.'

'I am afraid that you will find it a rougher expedition than you bargain for. It will mean a night's camping out.'

‘So much the better. I have never camped out in my life. Promise.’

‘I promise, if not now, at some future time.’

‘Why not now?’

‘The river is up, you know, and then it’s very difficult to get a black boy who will go near the Falls. But I will do my best. Do you think there is anything in the world I wouldn’t try to do if you asked me?’

Elsie’s eyes were like stars as she turned them upon him. It was a way of hers to answer a question with her eyes. But presently she said thoughtfully, ‘I don’t know.’

‘What is it that you don’t know?’ he asked. ‘Don’t you know that I would do anything in the world for you?’

‘Without any reward?’ she said coquettishly.

‘There would always be the hope of a reward—the hope——’

‘Ah!’ she exclaimed, cutting him short. ‘You are not disinterested. No one is. There is always the hope of a reward. I am tired of it all.’

She moved away from the verandah post as she spoke, and tossed the sprig of stephanotis from her. It fell on the edge of the steps, and he stooped and picked it up. She sat down on a squatter’s chair at the end of the verandah furthest from the drawing-room. The other men had come out of the dining-room. Mr. Trant was talking to Lady Horace. Lord Horace came to the door and called out ‘Elsie!’

‘Well?’

‘Come along in. Let us do Sharp’s chorus. Trant says he has got a voice.’

‘Trant! I wish Horace wouldn’t let him

be so familiar,' murmured Elsie *sotto voce*.
'Please ask Mr. Trant to try a solo. I can't sing choruses so soon after dinner.'

'Oh, don't go in,' pleaded Hallett.

'It's too hot inside,' Elsie went on, speaking to her brother-in-law. 'Let us stop here and be comfortable.'

'Well, you are'—Lord Horace began to protest, but was called off by his wife.

'What are you tired of?' asked Hallett abruptly, as he seated himself on the edge of the verandah, almost at Elsie's feet.

'Oh, I don't know. Tired of people—people who—who do everything from personal motives, tired of stupid speeches, and compliments, and all that.'

'Tired of being made love to, he said bitterly—'that's what you mean—of being made love to by men you don't care for.'

‘Well,’ said Elsie, quietly stroking her dress, ‘a good many men do make love to me, you know, and I can’t say that they are profoundly interesting as a body.’

‘And there are no exceptions—not even one?’ he exclaimed. ‘Does no one interest you?’

Elsie looked up swiftly, and went on stroking her dress again. ‘I should like to be made love to by some man who didn’t care in the least what I thought of him—a man who would go on his own way straight as a die—not turning, as you all do, to right or left, at a woman’s beck—a man with a purpose and a destiny. I don’t think I should mind whether it was a good purpose or a bad one—a magnificent destiny or a terrible one—only it must not be small or mean! Oh, a man who would follow his star at all costs. That is the man I should like to know.’

‘Go on,’ said Hallett. ‘Tell me more of what you would like in the man who made love to you.’

‘He must never pay me a compliment,’ said Elsie. ‘He must not want to do what *I* wish. He must make me do what *he* wishes. He must be my master.’

‘Oh!’ exclaimed Hallett impatiently, ‘that is a Jane Eyre-ish idea. No man who truly loves a woman can be her master. To love is to be a slave.’

‘How do you know that?’

‘Because I love you, and because I am your slave. Elsie, how long is it to go on? I can’t stand much more.’

‘It shall end to-night if you wish it,’ she answered.

‘But how? But how?’ he cried.

‘In this way.’ She bent a little towards him and spoke very distinctly.

‘I shall say to you, “Mr. Hallett, I am very grateful to you for caring for me, and I am honoured by your affection!” That is how the nice girls talk in novels.’

‘Bah!’ He gave his shoulders an impatient shake.

Elsie went on: ‘I am not worthy of your affection. I am a spoilt, heartless young woman, who has never loved anybody in her life—except Mammie and Ina—after a fashion. I don’t think it is in me to love any man—unless he was the kind of man I have described—the kind of man who isn’t at all likely to come my way. I am very selfish and very frivolous and very mercenary and very ambitious——’

‘No,’ he said doggedly; ‘I am not going to believe that.’

‘It is true though, all the same. The only thing that I care about is excitement.

I should die of dulness in the bush. I am nearly dead of dulness now. If I were a man I should fight battles; I should intrigue; I should do reckless things. As I am a woman, all I can do to amuse myself is to make men fall in love with me, and so gratify my sense of power, till——' She paused.

'Go on—till when?'

'Till they want what I don't want to give—till they want to come close to me—and paw me—and all the rest.'

'Elsie, you are horrid.'

'Yes, I know that I am,' she replied composedly. 'But you know that you are all alike. You all want to paw me. Then I hate you. And, what is worse, I hate myself.'

'At any rate, you are frank enough.'

'It is almost my only virtue, and, as you say, I make the most of it.'

‘Go on with the rest that you were going to say to me.’

‘I would say: “And so, Mr. Hallett, being this sort of person, and being so wholly despicable and so utterly unworthy of you, who are so highly estimable—and respecting you so truly——”’

‘Oh, Elsie, don’t laugh at me.’

‘I’m not laughing at you. I mean every word. You can’t imagine how truly I respect you. And so—that’s how I would wind up—I’m not worth dangling after any longer, and you had better find some other girl who will be less frank, perhaps, but who will, at any rate, give you something better worth having than what I can give you.’

‘Will you tell me first exactly what that is?’

‘Honest friendship, and a dash of—how shall I call it?—affection.’

‘That’s something gained anyhow,’ he exclaimed. ‘I’m not a bit discouraged ; I feel that I have made headway. You said that you were quite frank with me three months ago, and you told me then that there was no affection.’

‘I didn’t know you so well three months ago. I hadn’t had an opportunity of learning how estimable you are. Since then I have seen ever so much of you. I have seen you at home. I have heard your praises sung by everybody. You have done all sorts of nice things for me. I should be unnaturally ungrateful—a monster—if I hadn’t some affection for you. But affection expresses everything. There’s nothing more. There never will be anything more, and there ought to be a great deal more.’

‘Well, I am contented.’

‘You are very easily satisfied. My ideal

lover, my prince among men, would never be contented with—affection. He would want all that there was more, and if I hadn't got it to give him, he would make me a polite bow and go and look for it elsewhere.'

'That would be because he didn't love you as much as I do. If he loved you he would be satisfied to wait, on the chance of getting the rest.'

'And if he never could get the rest?'

'He would be quite satisfied as long as no one else got it.'

'Ah! but if the prince came?'

'Then he would accept his fate. That's the risk. You know I told you three months ago that I would run the risk. It was part of our compact.'

'Oh, our compact! I had forgotten that we had a compact—a real serious compact. Did we fix any limit for it?'

‘You told me,’ said Hallett, ‘that I might go on caring for you—being your friend—your lover on probation——’

‘No, no,’ she cried; ‘that means too much. You were to ask for nothing.’

‘I have never asked for anything—I have never even kissed your hand. I will never do so till you yourself tell me that I may.’ Hallett’s voice trembled with emotion. ‘I will worship you as one might worship a star. And you can do nothing to prevent that. In this sense you can’t help my being your lover.’

‘In that sense—no. You are very chivalrous. Now that is what I like. I admire you when you are like that. But at the same time I am going to say something horrid.’

‘Oh, say it.’

‘I think, do you know, that I despise you

a little for—for—caring so much. That is like a woman, isn't it ?'

'Yes ; it's like a woman—at least so the cynics who write novels tell us. Well, about our compact ? I am sure it had a limit—tell me.'

'You were to give me a definite answer whenever I asked for one.'

'And you asked me for one just now—and I gave it. You said you could not stand things any longer. So the compact is ended.'

'No. You said I might end it if I pleased ; and I don't choose to end it after what you said——'

'What ? About affection ?'

'Yes. I'll never end while you say that you care for me the least bit.'

'Affection isn't caring. It's what one feels for one's pet horse, or one's dog—or one's friend.'

‘Well,’ said he stolidly, ‘it’s enough for me Since it is that or nothing. I am your friend—till you tell me I am something more.’

‘But it is ended. I have no more responsibility. I have told you to go. You know you ought to marry. You are going into Parliament. You will be a Minister. You’ll have to have a house and to give parties. Political people ought to be married. They shouldn’t go dangling after girls——’

‘Not after girls ; after *a* girl.’

‘Well, they shouldn’t dangle after *a* girl. It’s undignified—especially after such a girl as I am—no money, no connections—except Horace, I suppose, being a lord, though an impoverished one, counts for something—a girl who only keeps a Kanaka boy in the kitchen, and has to make the jam and clean her own boots—oh yes, I assure you, Ina and

I have often cleaned our own boots. It's—— well, it's *cheap*, as Horace says.'

They both laughed. Just then someone struck a few chords on the piano. It was Lord Horace. And presently someone began to sing. This was not Lord Horace, who had a nice little baritone, but not a voice like this. And Lord Horace's French—though he only aired it occasionally in quotations, was shaky; while even Elsie, who had only had a few dozen lessons from a French Sister in the convent at Leichardt's Town, could tell that Mr. Dominic Trant had lived in France.

Thanks to the Sister, she could understand every word.

'Ninon, Ninon, que fais-tu de la vie?'

It seemed an appeal to herself. How could such a person sing like that? She asked herself the question as she got up from her chair and went into the parlour. Mr.

Dominic Trant looked at her while he sang. His eyes had something mesmeric in them. Irish eyes occasionally have. The man was certainly good-looking, and he did give one a sense of power. The effect that he had, however, was not quite pleasant. It was the power of a certain sort of passion—not of the highest kind. The power also of unflinching purpose—also not of the highest kind. This seemed to show itself when the man was singing. He began to interest her. He had only struck her before as being rather ill-bred.

‘Where did you learn to sing French?’ she asked when he had finished.

She had gone to the piano.

‘I learned French among French people,’ said Trant. ‘I thought you would like that song. It was sent out to me the other day. Do you understand it. Do you speak French?’

‘No,’ said she perversely. ‘How do you expect an Australian girl to speak French? So you have travelled a great deal, Mr. Trant?’

‘I wish you’d let me translate it to you,’ he said, not answering her question. ‘But I am quite sure that you understand it. I could tell that you did by your face.’

‘Sing something else,’ she replied; ‘something English, please.’

This time he sang a rollicking drinking song. Lord Horace was delighted. ‘You must come over,’ he said. ‘We must practise some glees, and we’ll let you have ’em at Tunimbah next week, Hallett.’

Frank had to come forward to explain that his sister-in-law had written or was about to write to Mr. Trant, to invite him to join the party.

‘I think it is not unlikely that my partner

Blake will be at Baròlin then,' said Mr. Trant. 'I had a telegram from him, as I told you, at the "Bean-tree" to-day.'

'Tell me about Mr. Blake,' said Elsie, subsiding into a chair, and motioning Trant to her side in a way that irritated Hallett. She had put on her coquettish air, which meant that she scented a victim. 'Why doesn't he ever come to the Luya?'

'He does come sometimes,' answered Trant.

'But nobody has ever seen him. I feel a curiosity about Mr. Blake.'

'What do you want to know about Blake?'

'Is he young?'

'No, not exactly. I suppose he is close upon forty.'

'Is he married?'

'No.' Mr. Trant laughed. 'He is fair game—and difficult game.'

Elsie drew herself up a little. She was quite sure now that Trant was very ill-bred.

‘What do you mean? Does he not like ladies? You said he was a ladies’ man.’

‘Oh yes, he likes ladies. He is not a marrying man though, Blake. He doesn’t care about anything except——’

‘Except——?’

‘Except adventure, amusement, making money.’

‘But people say that Baròlin isn’t exactly a money-making place.’

‘Oh! They say that, do they? Well, perhaps they are right. But then Blake makes money in other ways. He has got means. He is a luckier sort of devil than I am—obliged to stick at Baròlin all the year round.’

‘I say,’ put in Lord Horace, ‘is your partner any relation of the Blakes of Castle

Coola? Because you know my people know the Coola people; I've been fishin' close there.'

'I don't know,' said Mr. Trant. 'I should think it isn't unlikely. Blake doesn't like being questioned about his people—says he cut the whole lot when he came out here.'

'Got into a row perhaps,' said Lord Horace. 'That would be a Blake all over. They're a wild Irish lot—got a dash of Fenianism in the blood. There was a Blake who got drowned. He tumbled off a cliff or something. Waveryng knew him. He was a chap in a crack regiment, too. Well, it came out afterwards that he had been preaching to the chaps in the regiment, inciting to mutiny—like the Boyle O'Reilly business, you know.'

'Yes, I know,' said Trant stolidly.

'They said there would have been a court-

martial if the fellow hadn't died ; so it's lucky, perhaps, for him that he was drowned.'

'Well, as he was drowned, he can't have anything to do with Blake of Baròlin,' said Trant, with a laugh.

CHAPTER V

A GAUNTLET TO FATE

MR. TRANT went away the next morning. Elsie did not go into the parlour to bid him good-bye, but remained in the verandah where she was sewing, and listened to his parting words to Lady Horace, who invited him to repeat his visit. 'Ina has no tact,' murmured Elsie to herself. 'She might have seen that I didn't like him.'

'Where's your sister?' asked Mr. Trant, and Ina's want of tact again displayed itself when she promptly replied, 'Oh! Elsie is in the verandah.'

Mr. Trant came out. 'I have come to say good-bye, and to tell you that I

shall be over at Tunimbah when you are there.'

'I don't know that I am going to be there,' said Elsie perversely.

Mr. Trant's face fell. 'If you are not there, I shall come away the next day. . . . Do you live up here, Miss Valliant?' he asked, after having waited in vain for Elsie to reply.

'No,' she said. 'I am only staying with my sister, and I am going back to Leichardt's Town almost immediately.'

'Lord Horace wants me to come and sing. It isn't much of a ride over from Baròlin—only about fifteen miles.'

'Oh !' said Elsie.

'Miss Valliant, why don't you like me?'

'Really, Mr. Trant, you ask rather embarrassing questions.'

'But you don't. I see it in your face.'

You liked me a little after I sang last night. I knew I was having some effect upon you, and I should have liked to sing on for ever. I wish you'd let me come and sing to you.'

'But I'm going away. And besides, I mightn't like you to have an effect upon me.'

'That means that you are a little afraid of me. I know that ; I can make people afraid of me.'

'Can you really ? How ?'

'I don't quite know. By looking at them. I can always make a woman like me, if I want to. I don't often want to. I don't care about them.'

'Perhaps that is why you make them like you. People can often influence others just from the very reason that they don't care about them.'

'I don't think that reasoning ought to apply to you and me. Please don't be offended.

I only meant that it would be impossible to look at you often and remain indifferent.'

'In that case,' said Elsie, 'it would be better not to look at me.'

'Much better,' said Trant seriously. 'I quite agree with you. It would not suit my way of life to care too much for a woman.'

'What is your way of life?' asked Elsie, interested in spite of herself.

Trant laughed in a sort of *sotto voce* way that he had. 'You wouldn't understand it if I were to tell you.'

'From the outside it wouldn't seem to be so mysterious,' said Elsie, piqued—'living at Baròlin and looking after horses and cattle. I understand something about that.'

The black boy came round with Mr. Trant's horse. 'Well, good-bye,' he said in a lingering manner. 'I am very glad to have met you.' Elsie gave him her hand. The

black boy grinned as Trant went down the log steps.

‘I say,’ he said, ‘Ba’al you got him Mary belonging to you?’

‘Ba’al,’* answered Trant.

‘That budgery † Mary,’ said the black boy, making a gesture towards Elsie, who pretended not to see or hear. ‘Mine think it that fellow Hallett, plenty look after Elsie. Elsie—I say,’ shouted the imp—an Australian black is no respecter of persons—‘Mine got him dilly-bag for you.’

The dilly-bag, which had been plaited by the gins, smelled atrociously of the camp, but it was a good pretext for escaping Trant’s farewell gaze, and for running round to the store for a fig of tobacco, the purchase-money agreed upon for the dilly-bag.

Trant rode off. Close by the door Hallett

* Ba’al—No.

† Budgery—Good.

was saddling his horse, and Lord Horace was in conversation with a travelling digger, to whom he had been giving out rations.

‘Lord, what infernal cheek!’ Lord Horace was saying. ‘You’ll have to look sharp, Hallett, to beat that.’

‘What is it that you are to look sharp about?’ asked Elsie, coming towards him.

‘It seems,’ said Hallett, drawing his lips together, and relaxing them with a determined expression, ‘that though poor Slaney was only buried yesterday, the Opposition candidate has already declared himself.’

‘What!’ said Elsie.

‘Posters up on the gum-trees all round Goondi. This fellow has come from the “Bean-tree” this morning, and they had telegraphed it on there. I wonder if Trant knew anything about it.’

‘Why, of course,’ put in the digger.

‘Trant is his partner, and Trant was at the “Bean-tree” yesterday, telegraphing all over the country. Good-day, miss.’ He touched his felt wide-awake as Elsie turned to him impulsively.

‘You don’t mean that Mr. Trant is the Opposition candidate?’ she asked.

‘It’s his partner, miss,’ said the digger. ‘Blake of Baròlin. He thinks he’ll get in on the Irish vote—a flash sort of chap is Blake, they say. You take my advice, Mr. Hallett. Cut in at once, and take the wind out of his sails. You’re safe enough on the Luya, but those Goondi chaps are all agin the squatters, and they like blather.’

The man had taken some dirty shillings out of his pouch, and was handing them to Lord Horace in payment for his rations. Lord Horace counted them carefully and thrust them into his pocket.

‘Have a nip,’ he said, and took the digger to the kitchen, where Lady Horace acted as Hebe, and where his health was drunk, and that of her ladyship, with due formalities. Lord and Lady Horace were popular in the district, and a good many loafers found their way to the Dell. They could always fetch Lord Horace by admiring his amateur bush ways, and he always wound up business by offering them a grog.

‘Where are you going?’ asked Elsie of Hallett.

‘To the “Bean-tree,” and perhaps to Goondi, to look after my political interests.’

‘Isn’t it rather odd that Mr. Blake should have got into the field so quickly. He must have heard of Mr. Slaney’s death almost as soon as it happened,’ said Elsie.

‘I suppose he has been working up the district for some time on the sly,’ answered

Hallett. 'Trant must have set the wires going. That fellow brought me a telegram from the "Bean-tree," which had been forwarded by Mrs. Jem, on the chance of its picking me up here. My supporters want to see me.'

Elsie noticed that he had pinned into his coat the sprig of stephanotis she had thrown away the night before. 'Why do you keep that withered thing?' she said. 'If you come round to the verandah, I'll give you a better one.'

'Give me the bit you have in your belt,' he said. 'It will bring me luck.'

She took it out with a little hesitation. 'You'd much better have a fresh piece,' and she moved to the house. He followed her. It was only an excuse for getting out of eye-range. As soon as they were in the front verandah he stopped her as she was going to the stephanotis creeper.

• ‘No, give me that.’

‘No, I want it for myself.’

She held it back, but he took it from her, and put it to his lips.

‘I have spoilt it for you now,’ he said.

She still held out her hand. ‘How?’

‘Because I kissed the flowers. There!’
He tossed them away.

She gathered another spray. ‘That is a very nice one: and please don’t throw it away directly you are out of sight of the house.’

He laughed. ‘I’ll show you the ghost of it next time we meet.’

‘That means that we shan’t meet for a long time.’

‘Long enough for these to wither. I don’t know when I shall be able to get over again. I must canvass the district. We shall meet at Tunimbah.’

‘Write and tell me how things are going,’ she said.

‘Do you really care to hear? Oh! Elsie, it makes me glad.’

‘Of course I care to hear. I am immensely excited. I wish I could go to Goondi and canvass for you. I’d make love to the Luya selectors. I’d abuse Mr. Blake to your very heart’s content. Blake of Baròlin! Has it struck you that the name sounds rather poetic?’

‘Much more so than Hallett of Tunimbah.’

‘Well, yes! I love a poetic name. I couldn’t marry a man who was called Smith. Two Smiths proposed to me by the way, and they were good matches, and Mammie and Ina scolded me for sending them about their business. To be sure, I couldn’t have married them both. Oh, what a bore it is that one must marry—somebody!’

‘I can’t bear to hear you talk like that. Why must you marry—anybody?’

‘Because I’ve got no other way of gaining my living. Because my prettiness is going—oh yes! Girls in Australia go off very soon. And do you think I haven’t heard it said that Elsie Valliant is going off? Because I should hate to be an old maid. Mr. Hallett——’

‘Yes?’

‘You know we settled last night that our compact was at an end.’

‘Did we? I think not.’

‘Yes. I told you to go. I gave you a definite answer. There’s nothing more to wait for.’

‘I think there is a great deal to wait for.’

‘I was most splendidly unselfish. I sacrificed myself. You don’t even thank me for

my disinterestedness. You are to expect nothing from me, and I am to give up the gratification of having the member for Luya—a prospective minister—among my admirers.’

‘Let us make a new compact,’ he said gravely. ‘I don’t ask anything from you—except absolute frankness.’

‘Oh! that I have always given you.’

‘Go on giving it. Let us talk out quite openly to each other. Tell me that you don’t care a bit for me—if it is true. Tell me if your affection—you said it was affection—deepens or lessens. I shall never reproach you if you hurt me. I am willing to take my chance.’

‘Well, what else?’

‘Let us go on in this way. You will know—yes, for I shall tell you unless you forbid me—that I love you. That is not to be gain-said. I don’t care how long I have to wait.

You told me that you liked me better than anyone else who has ever cared for you.'

'Yes, but that isn't saying much. I have never cared for anyone.'

'Well, that is all I want—now. I think I like you to be like that. It fits in with my star fancy. I can worship you without a tinge of jealousy. And when you flirt, I know that it only means that you are dull and want amusement.'

'That is a charitable construction to put on my evil doings.'

'I don't mind. It's like the naughtiness of a child that doesn't know what it's doing. One can't think hardly of it when it's so unconscious. That's what you are. You don't realise that you can hurt people. And all that fancy about the hero—the Prince——'

'Yes, the hero—the Prince. Is that like

a child, too? But the child's fancies sometimes become the realities of the woman.'

'This is what I meant by absolute frankness. If the Prince comes, tell me, you will be able to trust me. I shall stand aside. I will worry you no more. Wait, and I will wait, too.'

'For my Prince? And how long do you give me to wait?'

'You shall fix your own time. Throw a gauntlet to fate.'

The phrase struck her. "A gauntlet to fate." I like that. I did not know that you could say such poetic things. Well, I will throw a gauntlet to fate. Well, here's my challenge.' She flung a glove she carried into the air. As it came down she tried to catch it, but it fell almost into his hand.

'That is an omen,' he exclaimed. 'And the time?'

‘ I challenge fate to bring my Prince along within the year—a year from this day—what is the date ? ’

‘ The twenty-ninth of March ! ’

‘ The twenty-ninth of next March then. It shall be yes or no, once and for all. ’

CHAPTER VI

THE COMING OF THE PRINCE

ELSIE seemed a little depressed for a week after Frank Hallett's visit. She felt that she had committed herself. To be sure, she consoled herself with the reflection that she had the fullest right to throw him over if her Prince came. But suppose that no Prince came, and that she had reached no further pitch of romantic ardour than she had at present attained?

‘I liked him better six months ago,’ she said to herself. ‘I was almost in love with him. I think I was quite in love with him one day when he seemed to like Ina better

than he liked me. How horribly selfish, and mean, and small to be jealous ! And jealous of one's own sister !'

Lady Horace was a little depressed too, if indeed anyone so equable could be depressed. Elsie accounted for it by the fact that Lord Horace had been aggravating. Lord Horace had occasionally fits of spleen and regret that he had ever left England—fits which were generally brought about by a perusal of his bank-book, and which usually ended in a grumble over dinner, and a reactionary burst of effusion to his wife.

He was away just now, helping Frank Hallett in his electioneering business, and the sisters were alone. They were sitting out in the verandah together one evening. Ina was in a squatter's chair, and Elsie sat on the edge of the verandah, and leaned her head against Ina's knees.

‘Ina,’ she said suddenly, ‘I wish I wasn’t such a wretch.’

‘What makes you say that, El?’

‘I don’t know. Frank Hallett, I suppose. It’s perfectly horrid of me to want to keep him dangling in a string. Why don’t I marry him straight away?’

‘Oh, why not?’

‘I don’t know. That’s just it. I like him. He is the only man I have ever been able to imagine kissing me without a shudder.’

‘Elsie!’

‘Well, it always comes to that in time. There was a moment when I was almost in love with him.’

‘Almost!’

‘How tragically you say that. There was a moment when it came over me that I had snubbed him too severely, and that he had deserted me for you; and I believe I

threw myself on the bed and cried out of grief and mortification.'

'I saw you,' said Ina, 'and I knew from that moment that you cared for Frank Hallett, and that you ought to marry him.'

'Did you really see me, Ina? And you never said a word. That was awfully like you. You'd never let me suspect that you knew how abominably petty I had been. It was all vanity.'

'No, no, Elsie, don't say that.'

'It's true. I've been like that all my life, and I'm ashamed of it. I hate myself sometimes. I can't bear a man who has admired me to take up with anyone else—even my own sister. I'm a mean creature.'

'You know you are not. I've seen you take the greatest pains to dress up girls in your own finery, so that they might have as good a chance of getting partners as you. You

have dressed me up in the same way. You have exulted in my little conquests. You know you have, Elsie. And if you were jealous for a moment it was because you cared. Do you think I'm not certain of that ?'

'Ina, you are trembling. What's the matter ?'

'I can't bear to hear you cry yourself down.'

'I shouldn't have been so horrid, Ina, if you had cared. It's a mercy you didn't, for I might have had a little trouble in getting up to such a height of heroic abnegation. Frank Hallett wouldn't suit you, Ina. He is too solid and steady, and for two angels to marry is a waste of regenerating material. No, Ina dear, you are clearly intended for a sinner.'

The girls laughed, both a little sadly. Elsie went on, 'Do you know, Ina, I think it's

a pity we weren't taught to earn our own living. I think it's a pity in a kind of way that we are pretty. If we had been ugly there wouldn't have been so much bother about this marrying business. As it is there's been nothing else for us to do. You are married, and it is all right, or at any rate I hope it is all right for you, but here I am, twenty-two, poor—and in three or four years' time I shall be losing my good looks and there'll be nothing for me to fall back upon. Now if we had been governesses, or even plain needlewomen, there would not have been any necessity for falling in love.'

‘Elsie!’

‘Oh yes! it is a very disagreeable necessity. The only thing more disagreeable would be to marry without it. It is so difficult to fall in love. I have been trying for all these years, and I haven't succeeded yet.’

‘Not even with Frank Hallett?’

‘Not even with Frank Hallett, and yet he has everything for one to fall in love with—good looks, though I don’t care for those in a man, nice manners, brains—of a sort—money—you couldn’t wish for anything more satisfactory. And I think I could be happy with him.’

‘Elsie,’ said Ina, with an inflexion almost of passion in her voice, ‘don’t be a spoiled child; caring only for a thing when you can’t get it—not valuing what is yours. Don’t let it all have been of no use: his love for you; my—my prayers for your happiness with him.’

‘You are right, I have been a spoilt child. Mammie has spoiled me, you have spoiled me, though I’m older than you, my poor Ina; and it is I who ought to have spoiled you. It’s that which makes me the heartless, freakish

thing that I am. And yet—and yet there's always the feeling that the Prince might come.'

'The Prince? Do you mean the Prince that is coming this winter? And what use will that be to you? You don't think you can marry him?' Ina alluded to the visit of a certain sprig of royalty, which was expected to take place that year. 'You don't think you are like *Beatrix Esmond*, do you?'

'Yes, I do think I am very like *Beatrix Esmond*. As for my Prince—well, I should be pleased if he wore a periwig and Court ruffles and carried a sword like Colonel Henry Esmond; but that is out of the question, I suppose, in this nineteenth-century Australia, and there are not many Colonel Esmonds in history—or out of it.'

'I think Frank Hallett would do quite as fine things as Colonel Henry Esmond.'

'Perhaps. But do you know, between

ourselves, I always thought Colonel Esmond was ever such a little bit of a prig. Ina, I have told Frank Hallett that if the Prince does not come along within a year's time I will marry him.'

'And you are going to flirt with everybody that comes along, with the idea that he may turn out to be your Prince?'

'I think I should know my Prince without trying experiments. As for flirting, I suppose a poor girl may be allowed to make the most of the last opportunity she will ever have. I shan't be able to flirt after I am married, you know.'

'I think you would flirt in your grave. You were flirting the other night with that horrid Mr. Trant.'

'I am not sure that he is horrid. I think that under some circumstances he might be rather interesting.'

‘At any rate he is horrid for having sneaked so about the election.’

‘They say all is fair in love and war. The two must be hard at it now. I wonder that Frank Hallett hasn’t written.’

‘I wonder that Horace hasn’t written,’ said Ina uneasily. ‘I don’t see how you can expect Mr. Hallett to write when you never answered his letter.’

‘Look here,’ said Elsie, ‘I don’t think Horace is quite fit to be trusted by himself. He’ll go flirting with the barmaids—you know Horace is a horrid flirt.’

‘Let us go over to Goondi to see about getting some things,’ said Lady Horace, ‘but I don’t think that would be a good time. We must have a new colonial oven before the Waveryngs come. Oh! Elsie, what shall I do with them?’

Lady Horace took life placidly as a rule,

but she was just now seriously discomposed by the news which had arrived by the last mail, that Lord and Lady Waveryng were about to make the tour of the world, and proposed to include the Australian Colonies in their programme.

Elsie laughed. 'Never mind. Take them camping out. Let Horace look after them.'

'If only the new house were built.'

'Well, I expect you'll find that Horace has anticipated Lord Waveryng's remittance, in shouting champagne to the diggers, and there'll be nothing left to pay for the imported bull, let alone the new house. You'd better make up your mind to go to Goondi.'

It was nearly a fortnight after Mr. Slaney's death and the sticking up of the coach by Moonlight. The excitement over Moonlight's escapade had paled before that of the election. The police had patrolled the district, and had

explored as far as they were able the fastnesses of the Upper Luya. But the Upper Luya was not easily explored. Every trace of Moonlight seemed to have disappeared, and the police returned to head-quarters to await the next full moon and be on the look out for another outrage.

The Tunimbah festivities had been postponed in view of the election. They had now been fixed for a date after the polling day, and would, it was supposed, inaugurate the entrance of Frank Hallett into public life. In the meantime young Hallett, accompanied by his supporters, harangued the district and started a reputation for making telling speeches. Lord Horace also made speeches of a somewhat humorous description, and exposed his friend to the risk of being unseated on a charge of bribery, from the lavish manner in which he regaled the electors

and distributed champagne. If, however, Hallett and his friends were energetic, Blake of Baròlin and his partner, Dominic Trant, were more energetic still. Elsie read the accounts of Mr. Blake's meetings in the papers, and she read his speeches, and contrasted them with those of her lover, not altogether to Frank Hallett's advantage. She began to think that it was perhaps as well she had not been brought into personal relations with the opposing candidate, since she might have found it more difficult to canvass with enthusiasm for Hallett among the Luya selectors. And yet she longed to see Blake. Everything she read about him appealed to her imagination. He was almost a stranger on the Luya, but this was perhaps better for him, since he had come daringly into the country, bold, picturesque, as it seemed irresistible; and had taken it by storm. It was

said that he would run Frank Hallett hard, though no one among the squatters doubted that Frank Hallett would win. Blake appealed to the masses. He had the Irish gift of eloquence. He had that terrible Irish passion, and he had the pluck of the typical Irishman and a certain dash of poetry and pathos and romance that is typical also of Ireland. There was about him, too, a dash of mystery. No one knew quite what he did, where he came from, and where he got the money which he scattered so freely. The women adored him, and women have a powerful voice at election times. He was something of the *preux chevalier*, though he represented the Radical interest. All this Elsie gleaned from the glowing descriptions in the 'Goondi Chronicle,' which was on his side, and the sneering remarks of the 'Luya Times,' which was on theirs. It was very easy to read

between the lines. Frank Hallett was safe, steady, eminently estimable, but he was not picturesque. The other was picturesque, and that was enough to make Elsie wildly anxious to see him. But probably he was not safe, steady, nor eminently estimable. She had her wish on that very day when she had suggested to Ina that they should go to Goondi. She had gone down to the Crossing—her own favourite Crossing—the place where she had met Hallett. Perhaps she had a lingering fancy that Hallett might ride that way and she would hear some news—something to enliven the deadly dulness of the life at the Humpey. Elsie was getting very tired of life at the Humpey, and was beginning to sigh for her Leichardt's Town parties, and the bank clerks and young gentlemen in the Government offices, who out of the Parliamentary season made up the roll of her admirers. She

had taken her book with her, for, unlike Ina, Elsie was fond of reading. It was a book which Hallett had brought her—a book she had often heard of and had never yet read. The book was a translation—Goethe's 'Elective Affinities.'

There was a nook of the creek, set back from Lord Horace's bridge, and out of sight of any passer-by who might cross the bridge. A gnarled ti-tree jutted into the stream—a little tree peninsula. It had great twisted roots covered with ferns, with pale tufts of the scentless mauve violet. The branches of the ti-tree bent down and dipped their red bottle-brush blossoms into the stream, which just here was dark and rather deep, and swirled in tiny eddies round the twigs and bowed roots. There was just room for one person to sit on the islet. The back of the tree and the twisted roots made a famous

arm-chair. A log spanned the stream above the islet, and was used by foot passengers. Elsie had crossed upon it. Lower down, the creek ran shallower over a bed of stones and rock crystals, and made a pleasant brawling. There was an intense dreaminess in the air, and there was no other sound but the chirping of grasshoppers, the occasional caw of a cockatoo, or cry of a bird in the scrub close by, and the footsteps of cattle or horses coming down to drink. Elsie was reading the scene in which Edward and Otilie first discover their love. She put the book down and leaned back against the tree, her cheeks flushed, and a tender smile was upon her lips. She had often read about love, but none that she read of seemed to her so real as this! Should she ever know such love? Was it so rare? Was it possible that in this manner Frank Hallett loved her? Why,

then, was it that she felt no returning throb? Elsie wondered vaguely with some dim faint realisation of the greatest of life's mysteries. But it was quite true that she had never loved. People had loved her, but she had never taken much account of what they felt and suffered. It occurred to her now that, perhaps, they had suffered a good deal, and that, perhaps, she might have been kinder.

‘I have never taken life seriously enough,’ Elsie said to herself. ‘I have never taken love seriously either.’ And then she laughed softly, as the thought flashed across her how impossible it would be to take some of those bank clerks from the serious standpoint. Life and love had only been a game to Elsie. And yet in the background of her consciousness there had always been a tremendous ideal—so Elsie herself would have phrased it—an image which was sacred, an image of a

prince. Only *a* prince. *The* Prince had not ridden through the enchanted forest where the princess slept.

There was a sound of horse's feet now, a more definite tramp than that of the stray animal making for water. A traveller. Could it be Hallett? Elsie would not move. From where she sat she could not see him as he crossed the bridge; but she would see him when he mounted the bank, and if it were Hallett, she would give him a 'Coo-ee' and surprise him. The tramp came nearer. Another odd fancy came into Elsie's mind. She remembered Hallett's rather contemptuous remark when she had described the ideal lover . . . 'A Jane Eyre-ish ideal.' The tramp on the hard ground made her think of the metallic clatter of Rochester's horse rising above the murmuring of rills and whisperings of the wintry afternoon. There was no simili-

tude between this dreamy southern afternoon and the grim frost-bound landscape of the book, but the fancy was in her mind. And there was a dog—another Gytrash—a human-looking shaggy creature with intelligent eyes and a huge masklike head. She could see the dog as it bounded up the bank and turned back to bark. She knew the dog quite well. It was the big collie that belonged to one of the Tunimbah stockmen. Of course the rider was Frank. She coo-eed. The horse was pulled back and turned on the threshold of the bridge. A mettlesome animal. She could hear it snort and quiver. Pioneer was like that. This was Pioneer's colour. She had caught a glimpse of a black hind quarter. Elsie bent forward and coo-eed again; at the same time she plucked an overhanging bottle-brush blossom of the ti-tree and flung it at the rider.

The missile did not hit its mark, but she

was wholly unprepared for the effect of her heedless action. There was a plunge, a kick, a rear forward, and the horse and rider darted past, the creature swerving blindly up the bank, cannoning against a she-oak, and then dashing under the low branch of a white cedar. The rider stooped to save himself, but too late. A projecting boss of the tree caught his shoulder and almost dragged him from his seat. He was a good horseman and a man of nerve, and gripping the bridle checked the horse and dismounted. He staggered a little and put his hand to his shoulder. The coat had been torn, and he was evidently severely bruised. The pain of the blow made him turn for a moment quite white. What struck Elsie in the midst of her consternation was that he never uttered a sound.

She herself had given a cry of alarm and self-reproach. She had seen as the horse

rushed past that it was not Pioneer, and that its rider was not Frank Hallett. This was a much more spirited and highly-bred animal. The thing was all quivering now, its nostrils distended, and the whites of the eyes gleaming. The stranger patted it with his left hand—it was the right arm that had been hurt. ‘Wo, old man! Quiet, old boy!’ he said, and turned and saw Elsie.

She had left her islet and was standing—an image of dismay. ‘Oh, I am so sorry! I hope you are not hurt.’

The stranger took off his hat. He raised his right arm to do so, and winced with pain.

‘Oh, you are hurt. Please let me see. I can’t tell you how sorry I am.’ He came down to the little plateau where she stood, leading the horse, which though still restive followed him.

Elsie saw the torn coat. She went close to him and touched his shoulder.

‘It’s nothing,’ said the stranger; ‘only a knock. It doesn’t hurt at all—at least nothing to speak of.’

‘It hurts horribly: I can see that, and it is my fault. I hadn’t the faintest notion—I thought you were Frank Hallett.’

The stranger laughed. ‘No, I am certainly not Mr. Frank Hallett; I am Blake of Baròlin.’

Elsie did not laugh. It seemed to her that she had known from the first moment that this was Blake of Baròlin.

He was picturesque. Oh yes, there was no doubt of that. She could imagine him swaying a crowd. There was something kingly about him. He was tall, and straight, and powerful. He had eyes like the eyes of an eagle, they were so piercing and so stead-

fast. And there was a Napoleonic suggestion about his firm mouth and chin—a certain combined sweetness and dignity and resolution—a fire and force in the expression of his features and the carriage of his head. Very handsome. But a great deal more than handsome.

‘I can feel that it is swelling,’ she said in deep distress, taking away her hand. ‘It ought to be bathed and seen to at once, or you will be horribly bruised. I don’t know what to do. Shall I run up to the house and send the black boy for your horse? You can’t lead it like that. It hurts you every time it tugs. Give me the bridle. What’s its name?’

‘His name—oh’—he paused and laughed rather oddly though—‘he’s called Osman. No, you couldn’t hold him. He’s a young horse, and there’s something up with him to-day. I was off-guard or he wouldn’t have

shied at you like that. I can't think what startled him.'

'It was I. I threw some of these things at him.' She twitched off a ti-flower. 'I threw it at you—at you—at least I threw it'—she laughed nervously—'at Mr. Frank Hallett.'

'I am sorry, for your sake, that I am not Mr. Frank Hallett.'

'You needn't be sorry. Will he stand?' Blake had strapped his horse round a sapling.

'Yes, I'll just wait a minute or two, if you don't mind, till the twinge has gone off. Then I'll get on to Baròlin.'

'Oh, won't you come up to the house and have it seen to? My sister will be pleased.'

'Your sister?'

'Lady Horace Gage. I am Miss Valliant; I am staying with her.'

'Yes, I heard that.' Mr. Blake made her a

bow. 'I beg your pardon for having frightened you.'

'Oh, it isn't—I mean it was all my fault. Please come up to the Humpey!'

'I don't think I ought to do that. You see, Lord Horace and I have been doing nothing but hurl abuse at each other for the last week or so, and I'm on a canvassing expedition to the Upper Luya.'

'Do you think you are going to beat Frank Hallett?' asked Elsie.

'I hope so. Yes, I think I shall beat him. If I do, I suppose you will hate me?'

'I don't know why you should say that. Mr. Hallett is not my brother or—or any other relation.'

'But you wish him to get in?'

'Yes—I wish him to get in.'

'Because he is a friend, or because you are in sympathy with his politics?'

‘Oh, his politics! I don’t know anything about politics. I don’t care in the least whether the squatters get their Land Bill, or whether the agriculturists get things their way, It doesn’t matter.’

‘Don’t you think it matters that the squatters monopolise a great deal of land to which they have no right, and of which poor people ought to have a share?’

‘There is plenty of room in Australia,’ said Elsie.

‘Yes, there is plenty of room, and all the more reason for legislators to see that justice is done. I mean to go against your Squatters Land Bill, Miss Valliant. I mean to fight Mr. Hallett on all his points tooth and nail. I am fighting him now. We are enemies in open field, and you and yours are on his side of the battle.’

‘Oh, we are sisters of mercy—Ina and I,’

said Elsie laughing. 'In common charity one may bind up one's enemy's wounds.'

'I think my wounds will keep till I get to Baròlin,' he said, laughing too. 'They are not very serious: I will not put your and Lady Horace's loyalty to so severe a test. I am glad you call yourself a sister of mercy, and that you take up so disinterested a position—perhaps I ought rather to say so womanlike a position.'

'Why womanlike?'

'You confess that it is for the sake of friendship, not from political conviction, that you are on Mr. Hallett's side.'

Elsie laughed. He went on: 'Well, at any rate, though naturally Mr. Hallett has your best wishes, I may hope that you will not owe me any serious grudge if I am returned.' He looked down at Elsie with a half smile. Where was all her self-confidence gone?

To anyone else she would have made a jesting reply into which she would certainly have infused a spice of coquetry. Their eyes met. Hers dropped and she flushed slightly. He thought her wonderingly pretty.

‘No,’ she said weakly.

‘Thank you. I am very glad of that. I’m afraid we shall not have the chance of seeing much of you in the Luya, but if I do get in, we shall meet at the Leichardt’s Town balls, perhaps.’

‘Don’t you mean ever to come to the Luya? Do you always leave everything to Mr. Trant?’

‘Oh no. I do come to the Luya occasionally. I have been up here several times.’

‘We haven’t heard of you coming.’

‘No, I suppose you haven’t heard of my coming. But then you have such big

excitements on the Luya that it is not surprising.'

'You mean Moonlight?'

'Ah! He seems to be an excitement. What do you think of Moonlight, Miss Valliant?'

'I admire him. I would give anything to have been in the coach when he stuck it up.'

'Shouldn't you have been afraid?'

'No. Why? I have no money to be robbed of—not even a watch. And Moonlight only robs misers and the gold escort. I suppose he thinks he has a right to the spoils of the earth. And,' she added, 'that's your principle, Mr. Blake.'

'It's the principle of the oppressed. And so you sympathise with Moonlight?'

'I should like to see him,' said Elsie dreamily. 'Do you know that I told Mr. Hallett, the day after the robbery, that I

wished Moonlight would carry me off to his lair ? ’

‘ You wished to be carried to Moonlight’s lair ! Well, more unlikely things have happened. I can quite imagine that if Moonlight, as they call him, heard you say that, he might be inclined to act upon your suggestion. What did Mr. Hallett say ? ’

‘ I should have to be ransomed, you know—some of the squatters here would try and buy me back. ’

‘ I haven’t the least doubt of that. The district would rise in search of you, and they would probably be more successful than Captain Macpherson and his men seem to have been. And—well so much the worse for Moonlight. Good-bye, Miss Valliant. ’

‘ You are going ? ’

‘ Yes. ’ He unbuckled his horse’s bridle. ‘ It will be late before I get to Baròlin,

especially if I stop at the cedar-cutters' on the way.'

'Ah, we have been beforehand with you. They have promised us their vote.'

'So you have been canvassing for Mr. Hallett? He is very fortunate. I wish I had been the lucky candidate who secured your partisanship.' He raised his hat again. Elsie held out her hand.

'Is your shoulder very painful?'

'A little; but it is not worth thinking about. I am glad of the accident since it has given me the opportunity of making your acquaintance. I have wished for a long time to meet you.'

'Why?'

'I will tell you some time, when I know you better. It is rather a long story, and it might be disagreeable to you to hear it.'

‘I don’t understand.’ She looked at him wonderingly.

‘No? Never mind. It will keep. You are leaving your book behind you.’ He picked the volume up and handed it to her, glancing at the title as he did so.

‘The “Elective Affinities!” Do you believe in that theory?’

‘No. I can’t tell. I have had so little experience——’

‘I should have thought that you had had a considerable experience.’

‘You mean——’ she stopped and blushed.

‘Well,’ he said, ‘I mean that you must have tested some of the laws of human chemistry, and are at least in a position to judge what kind of qualities you yourself are most likely to attract.’

‘Oh no,’ she exclaimed with childlike

candour which amused him ; ‘I can’t judge in the least. They are all so unlike.’

‘They must at any rate have one common quality.’

‘That of being commonplace,’ she said.

He laughed and slipped the bridle over his left arm. ‘Come, Osman. Good-bye, Miss Valliant.’

CHAPTER VII

‘ I FOLLOW MY STAR ’

WHEN Elsie Valliant set her heart upon doing any particular thing, she usually had her way. She had set her heart upon going to Goondi during the election week, and so she persuaded Lady Horace to take her. They rode to the Bean-tree Crossing, as the Telegraph Station and German Settlement near them was called, and there picked up the coach to Goondi. It was only a one day's expedition, after all. Two coaches passed in the day, one in the morning and one at night.

Lady Horace was not very hard to persuade. Perhaps she was more excited about

the chances of Hallett's return than she chose to show. Perhaps she was a little anxious about her husband, of whom they heard vaguely as 'shouting drinks' to the electors, driving four-in-hand about the country, playing practical jokes upon his opponents, certainly flirting with electors' pretty daughters, and otherwise having what he described as 'a good time.'

Ina was so quiet that no one ever quite knew what she felt or thought ; but Elsie had a shrewd suspicion that she was not perfectly satisfied with her handsome and excitable young husband, and Elsie had heard Lord Horace speak more crossly to Ina than befitted the short time they had been married. To be sure he had apologised very penitently afterwards, and had declared to Elsie that Ina was an angel, which she told him had always been perfectly well known in the family.

Lord Horace had added that perhaps it might be better for him if she were not quite such an angel, as she would keep him in stricter order, and there Elsie had agreed. Anyhow, Ina seemed to think that he needed a little keeping in order now, and so she said that as she wanted to do some shopping, and as Goondi was the nearest place where she could buy a yard of silk or a reel of cotton, she and Elsie would go.

It was a queer straggling bush town, with a large and floating population, mostly of miners. The claims, with their heaps of stone and scaffolding of machinery, gave it a different appearance from the ordinary township. All day and night the machinery was at work, and all day and all night one could hear the dull thud of the blasting. There was only one street in the township, but it went up- and down-hill for nearly two miles.

Goondi was all hills and little wooden houses and heaps of stone and mullock, which is the refuse from the crushing. There was only one hotel—a big two-storeyed wooden house, with verandah and balcony all round, commonly known as ‘Ruffey’s. Here the rival candidates were staying. Hallett harangued his mob from the north balcony, and Blake addressed his from the one on the south. Lord Horace was waiting outside the hotel to receive them when the coach drove up. His refined, Greek-featured face looked paler than usual from fatigue and late hours. He was very much excited, and could talk of nothing but the election. He began at once to tell Ina of how he had been making himself agreeable to the wives of the diggers and settlers, and of the bush balls at which he had been assisting; of how the men had openly derided him for being a Lord, and of

how he had entertained and impressed the ladies by his answers to their questions concerning aristocratic life in England. 'Lord! I have crammed them,' he said confidentially; 'but I think we are doin' it, though it'll be a close shave. Puts me in mind of Waveryng's election. I fetched 'em last night, I can tell you, by describin' all that, and singing 'em the war-cry—I composed it myself—a sort of hash of the "Marseillaise," the "Star-spangled Banner," and "Tommy Dodd." The worst of it is that fellow Trant has got a voice that takes the wind out of our sails, and then he appeals to their feelin's. Blest if he didn't give 'em "The Wearing of the Green" last night—struck up when Blake began about the Irish wrongs—he's a Fenian is that fellow Blake, but he is not a bad sort for all that; and I really felt inclined to blubber, it was so pathetic.'

Hallett came towards them. They were in the entrance-hall, and he was coming down the stairs. From the other side of the hotel floated sounds of the mob he had been addressing. He, too, looked excited, and a little nervous. He went straight to Elsie, just shaking hands with Lady Horace as he passed.

‘You see I said I would come,’ she said.

‘I’m afraid you’ve come to see me beaten,’ he answered in a low voice. ‘I mustn’t confess to defeat now, but I feel pretty sure of it.’

‘But he is a stranger,’ said Elsie. ‘What has he done? How has he got over the district?’

‘The man has power,’ said Hallett bluntly, ‘and I haven’t.’

‘Yes, he has power,’ said Elsie dreamily; ‘I can see that.’

‘You’ve seen him, then?’ said Hallett, surprised. He had not heard of that meeting by the creek. Elsie had not even told her sister. ‘Take care,’ he added in a low voice, ‘there he is.’ Aloud he said, ‘I think we had better go up to your sitting-room, Lady Horace. This isn’t exactly the place for ladies.’

A number of men had come in from the outside entrance. They were talking noisily. Trant’s voice could be heard above the others. He stopped short at the sight of the ladies, and lifted his hat to Lady Horace, who gave him rather a cool nod. All the men seemed to cluster naturally round the central figure—Blake himself—taller than the others, more erect, and altogether better-bred looking. He, too, raised his hat at the sight of Elsie, but with his left hand. She made a slight movement in his direction. It was more a gesture

than a movement, but he interpreted it as she had intended, and came to speak to her.

‘I hope your arm is all right now,’ she said. ‘No, I see it isn’t. Why do you wear a sling?’

‘The shoulder was dislocated,’ he said in an eager confused manner, ‘and Abatos pulled all the way to Baròlin, and made a nasty business out of what would have been nothing if I had kept quiet.’

‘Abatos!’ she exclaimed. ‘You called him Osman.’

‘Abatos,’ said Hallett, ‘is the name of Moonlight’s famous horse.’

‘I suppose I was thinking of that. Someone has just been speaking of Moonlight,’ replied Mr. Blake quietly. But Elsie had fancied when she spoke that his face had changed, and that he had grown paler. Was it the sight of her which had agitated him?

The girl's heart thrilled with an odd momentary sense of triumph.

'The excitement of an election is apt to confuse one's faculties,' Blake went on. 'You have come into the thick of the fight, Miss Valliant. But I think on the whole'—he turned to Hallett—'that the warfare is conducted with as little rancour as could be expected, considering the sort of mob we have to deal with.'

'Your mob,' said Hallett laughing. 'Mine is decorous, compared with your wild Irishmen——'

'My wild Irishmen? They are the best-natured and the best-behaved fellows in the world,' Blake insisted good-humouredly. 'They can sing, too, I can tell you.'

'Yes—they can sing,' Hallett admitted, 'and they can cheer in their queer shrill sort of way—I can't always make out whether

they are delighted or disappointed. It sometimes sounds to me like a death-wail, and then, by Jove ! I am told it is a shout of triumph.'

'You'll hear it to-morrow,' Blake said carelessly, 'and then you will know that it isn't a death-wail—and don't you forget it.'

'I am very curious about it—I want to hear it,' Elsie said in an abstracted sort of way, as if she were talking to herself.

'I don't,' Hallett declared with a laugh. 'Well, Blake, we shall know it all to-morrow. "God show the right," as the old proclamations of battle used to say.'

" "God show the right," ' repeated Blake abstractedly. 'That's what they say in Ireland. Come what will, Hallett,' said Blake, 'you are a good fellow, and a gallant opponent.' Then the little group dispersed.

Sounds echoed all through the wooden building, and 'Ruffey's' was by no means a

peaceful haven on this election eve. From the bar down below there came noise of revelry, hoarse callings for drink, snatches of song, rough laughter, and occasionally an oath. In the balcony, on which Lady Horace's sitting-room opened, all this could be distinctly heard. It was an odd place for a young lady to choose, but for the greater part of the evening Elsie Valliant sat there and listened to the din and watched the street below. There was a moon getting near its full, and the long straggling roadway, with its wooden houses—its odd-looking groups of passers-by: rough bushmen, diggers, Chinamen, blacks—presented a rather amusing spectacle. But Elsie did not seem so deeply interested in the street scene as in a low monotonous hubbub, with one voice distinguishable through the babel, which came to her from the other side of the building, and which she

guessed to be that of Blake holding a meeting. There were interruptions every now and then. Sometimes his voice rose so clearly that she could almost make out the words. Sometimes another voice interposed ; sometimes there were hoots from below ; sometimes cheers ; but through it all the one voice declaimed with a force and passion that Elsie felt to be real oratory. She would have given the world to hear what he was saying. She did, indeed, crane her head over the balcony, but after a minute drew it back, afraid lest in the moonlight someone should see and recognise her. By-and-by it ended. The street became quieter, but the noise in the hotel increased. Hallett came up and joined her in the balcony.

‘ Have you been listening to Mr. Blake ? ’ she asked.

‘ No, ’ he replied ; ‘ I have been orating on

my own account. Why do you stay out here? It isn't fit for you, with all that noise going on in the bar.'

'I will go to bed,' she said listlessly. 'I am tired.'

'Stay a moment. Come round here; it is quieter. I told you I'd show you the ghost of your flower the next time we met. Here it is.'

He opened his pocket-book and showed her the stephanotis spray crushed between its leaves. 'I have worn it,' he said, 'as one of the old knights you are so fond of might have worn his lady's token when he went to battle. It has been with me all through my battle.'

'Give it to me,' she said, in a strained sort of voice. He did so. Before he could guess her intention, she had crumpled it into a shapeless lump, and had thrown it into the street.

‘Why did you do that?’ he exclaimed, deeply hurt.

‘Because it’s worth nothing. It has not brought you luck. It never will bring you any good luck.’

‘Have you made up your mind, then, that I am to fail?’ he said in a pained voice.

‘Yes, I feel it, I know it. He has victory in his face. That man will succeed wherever he goes, and in whatever he chooses to do.’

‘In whatever he chooses to do!’ Hallett repeated. ‘Don’t say that. I cannot bear you to say it.’

‘Why? I only say what I feel. I never knew any man who gave me that impression in the same way.’

‘Do you know why I cannot bear you to say it? It is because he may choose to influence you.’

‘Well!’ said Elsie with an odd smile.

‘That might not be an unpleasant sensation. Don’t be angry,’ she added hurriedly, seeing the look of pain that came into his face. ‘I didn’t mean to vex you. Nothing in the world is more unlikely to happen.’

‘As that he should influence you, or that he should choose to do so?’

‘Both, or either—as you please. Good-night, Mr. Hallett. We have had a thirty-mile journey to-day, and Ina has gone to bed.’

They went in. He gave her a candle, and bade her good-night.

‘Do you know where your room is?’ he asked.

‘Yes ; it is a good way along the passage—horribly far from Ina’s. I shall lock my door.’

‘Don’t be frightened if you hear noises. They are not likely to shut up the hotel very early. I think it was a mistake your coming here just at this time.’

‘I don’t think so at all. I wouldn’t miss it for the world. But I should like to know who has the room next to mine. Where are you?’

‘On the ground floor. I am very sorry. I will find out who is next you if you like.’ He went out. After a minute or two he came back.

‘Mr. Dominic Trant has the room next yours.’

‘I don’t think I like Mr. Dominic Trant,’ said Elsie. ‘He has such odd eyes. I think he believes he can mesmerise people. All the time we were standing in the hall downstairs, he was looking at me. Tell me—is he going to Tunimbah?’

‘I suppose so. Edith says it will be the greatest mistake to get up a coolness on account of the election. She has asked Mr. Blake to come too.’

‘I suppose she is right.’

‘Yes ; Edith has a good deal of tact in these matters, but it would be odd if he should come as the member for Luya.’

‘Very odd,’ said Elsie. She took her candle and left him. He went down the stairs, and she to her room.

It was, as she had said, a long way down the passage. It was in a wing that had been added to the main building, and there was a bend in the corridor that made it seem more isolated still. She was a little dismayed when she saw that Mr. Dominic Trant was fumbling in his keyhole.

‘They’ve locked my door,’ he said. ‘It’s a queer sort of shop, isn’t it, Miss Valliant?’

‘Yes,’ said Elsie shortly. ‘Good-night.’

‘You are next me. These wooden partitions are confoundedly thin. Don’t be frightened if you hear me coming in and

going out. Blake and I are going to amuse ourselves.'

'I hope you will do so. Would you let me pass, please?'

Trant drew back. 'I intend to make you like me, Miss Valliant. You don't now, but I intend that you shall. Do you know that I am coming to Tunimbah?'

'Yes, I know that. Please bring some songs with you.'

'Blake is coming, too. He will be the member for Luya, and Mr. Hallett's nose will be out of joint. Look here, Miss Valliant, I've got something to say to you.'

'I don't think I want to hear it now, Mr. Trant.'

'I shall not be a minute telling you. I know you are a flirt. Everyone says so. You'll be wanting to flirt with Blake. Take my advice, and don't. He is a nasty customer,

is Blake. There is nothing he enjoys so much as compromising a woman. He has got no more heart than this key.'

'I don't see what that matters to me, Mr. Trant—or to you.'

'It does matter to me. I know Blake's ways. I don't want to see you let in. I think a great deal of you—a great deal more than you know.'

'I am very much obliged to you.' She turned the handle of her door, and went into her room, leaving him outside. Then she tried the door after her, but to her dismay she discovered that there was no key, and that the bolt was frail and unreliable. She tried to reason herself out of her terror of Trant.

'He has probably been drinking,' she said to herself, 'though he looked cool enough.'

She sat down without undressing. It seemed to her that there were all kinds of disquieting sounds about. The roar of the machinery, which she could not at first understand, was uncanny, and so were the occasional detonations from the blasting works. By-and-by the noise in the bar subsided a little. The hotel itself was fairly quiet. It was now about midnight. She heard steps along the corridor, and they set her trembling again. The steps paused at Trant's door. Someone went in.

Yes, the partitions were horribly thin. She could hear the voice distinctly. It was the voice of Blake, and yet she was conscious that he was speaking almost in a whisper.

‘Are you ready?’

Trant murmured something. She could not distinguish the words.

Blake went on, still in the same low clear voice, and with an accent of contempt. 'Naturally you don't understand. One must follow one's star.'

Again a murmur from Trant, of which she only distinguished the words 'eight thousand.'

A laugh—an odd mocking laugh. 'The member for Luya. Droll! There's a certain humour in the situation.' And then a sentence in French. She could not make it out. A sound as of someone moving about and opening and shutting things followed. Presently one went out—both she imagined at first, for there was a complete silence. Elsie could bear it no longer. She must go and find Ina, and ask her to stay with her. She did not know what had frightened her. And why should she be frightened either of Trant or of Blake? But she was frightened for all that.

Her nerves were like stretched wires. To remain there till morning seemed an impossibility. She took up her candle and opened her door. The passage was all dark. She would go to Lady Horace's room. A window in the passage was open, and a gust blew out the candle. She gave a faint cry. At that moment the door of Trant's room opened and a man came out—a man in riding dress, with a black sort of poncho covering his coat. He drew back as he saw her and heard her exclamation. He had no candle, but at that moment the moon came out from under a cloud and shone through the uncurtained window. She saw that it was Blake.

He came towards her. 'Miss Valliant, I'm afraid I frightened you. I did not know that you were so near.'

'I am in the next room. I heard you.'

‘You heard me!’ His eyes were full upon her. How bright they looked. They had an odd intent expression. There was something wild in their gaze. ‘Then you must have preternaturally keen ears, for I spoke in a whisper.’

‘I heard you say that one must follow one’s star. What is your star? Where is it taking you?’

He continued looking at her in that strange rapt manner.

‘Where it has always led me—to danger and to misfortune.’

‘To misfortune!’ she repeated. ‘Oh no, no. Why do you say that?’

‘Because fate has been against me, and because I’m in a reckless mood to-night. Does the full moon affect you, Miss Valliant? Does it make you feel that you could do any sort of dare-devil thing? I’ve got the music

of Berlioz' "Faust" in my head. Do you know it?

'No. How should I know it?'

'True. They haven't performed it in Australia, I fancy. Well, if you ever hear it, note the description of Faust's wild ride with Mephistopheles. I think Mephistopheles is always abroad when the moon is at the full. That's how I feel.'

'You are not going to ride to-night?'

'Yes. I am going for a gallop. That's my way of working off my excitement.'

'You don't seem as if you were excited. You are quite pale and cold and resolute. It is only your eyes that have a wild look.'

'They look wild, do they? They ought not to look wild when they are fixed on you.' They were fixed on her now searchingly.
'Go back to bed, Miss Valliant. Nothing will

disturb you. You may sleep as soundly and peacefully as a child.'

'I am frightened. I was going to find my sister's room,' she said falteringly. 'I don't like being here alone—so far from everyone.'

'You should not be frightened. No one will hurt you. What frightens you?' he said.

'I don't know. It's very stupid, I suppose. Things seem odd and eerie—it's so odd my standing here talking to you at this hour.'

'There's nothing so odd in that. Go back to bed. Don't wake up your sister. I'm sorry that I told you about my wild mood. The truth is that I come of a hot-headed race. I love adventure, violent exercise, all sorts of things that stir one's blood, and make life worth living. I love solitude, and for weeks I have been living in a crowd and putting a curb on myself——'

‘But there is Mr. Trant. You will not be alone.’

‘Oh, Trant understands me, and lets me have my fling. To-morrow I shall be as meek as a lamb, and you won’t recognise the spurred and booted desperado of to-night.’ He laughed as he spoke, and made a movement with his arms which caused his cloak to fall back. In the moonlight Elsie saw the gleam of something at his waist, and realised that it was the shining handle of a pistol.

‘You look like a desperado. Why do you carry that pistol?’

‘Oh, that—I had forgotten. Moonlight may be about, you know. It is as well to be armed when one scours the country at full moon.’

A clock struck twelve. He held out his hand. ‘Do as I tell you. Sleep well, and look upon this midnight meeting as a dream.’

His touch gave her a curious sensation. 'Your hand is quite cold,' she said. 'What is the matter?'

'Nothing is the matter.'

'It is as cold as death,' she repeated.

'Death—what do you know of death? Go to bed; go back and sleep. Dream happy dreams. Good-night.'

He opened her door for her, and waited till she had gone through and had closed it behind her. She heard his steps going softly down the corridor. Then she shot the bolt and quietly undressed. It was very strange, but she had no thought of disobeying him, no thought now of going to Lady Horace. She felt soothed and satisfied, and yet through all there was a certain thrill of excitement. His eyes with their bright intent look seemed to be gazing at her in the darkness. There was something compelling in the look. It haunted

her and gave her a strange dreamy feeling. She did not sleep for a long time. She pictured him scouring the plains on his black horse Osman, and working off the fever of his blood, the hilt of his pistol gleaming as his cloak flew back in the wind. In her fancy he seemed like some mediæval knight. What a contrast to the dull prosaic bushmen round her, with their eternal talk about cattle and horses, their petty interests and low aims. This man spoke of his star. How strange that he should have used that phrase. She thought of her talk with Hallett, and of how she had said that the man she loved must have a purpose and a destiny, and a star.

CHAPTER VIII

THE MEMBER FOR LUYA

It was early morning before Elsie fell asleep. She slept late. Ina knocked at her door, and found it bolted and went away again. Later, when Elsie was dressed and went into the sitting-room, she found the whole party assembled there. Lord Horace was talking excitedly. 'Eight thousand pounds' worth of gold. By Jove! it's a haul!' he was saying.

Eight thousand pounds! The words brought a thrill to Elsie. 'What are you talking about?' she exclaimed. 'What does it mean?'

'It means the most daring robbery that

ever was committed. The gold escort robbed eight miles from Goondi at three o'clock this morning—six armed policemen to five bush-rangers,' said Hallett.

'And the devil, as they say, in the shape of a black horse,' put in Lord Horace. 'I should like to have the chance of a shot at Abatos. What fools they were not to aim at the horse. 'Pon my soul, it's the most extraordinary thing. Etheridge, the sergeant, swears the men are all in armour.'

'Copying the Kellys,' said Lady Horace.

'Copying the mediæval duffers rather. It's a better sort of armour than the Kellys. That must be chain armour of the best manufacture, or they couldn't ride the distances in the time and do the things they do—unless Moonlight has the power of disappearing into the bowels of the earth whenever he sees fit. It beats me, and I can't help

having a sneaking regard for such a plucky fellow. I hope Macpherson won't nab him.' Lord Horace went on walking fiercely up and down the inn parlour.

Elsie sat silent. She, too, was intensely excited.

'The worst of it is that no one cares two straws about the polling to-day,' said Hallett. 'All Goondi is mad over the robbery. I am afraid it will affect the votes.'

'No, it won't,' said Lord Horace. 'I shall drag the voters in—your voters, at least.'

Elsie ate her breakfast listlessly. Hallett looked at her with anxious eyes.

'You look as if you hadn't slept. And you don't seem so tremendously interested in Moonlight as I thought you would be.'

'Yes,' she answered, 'I am tremendously interested. Was anybody hurt?'

‘Moonlight has never yet shed blood,’ said Hallett; ‘and as for the bushrangers, Etheridge says that the bullets glanced by them. He let the police fire. They weren’t prepared, and before they had time to reload, Moonlight and his men had closed in on them, and the whole thing was up. They were found gagged and tied to gum trees by a selector who started early this morning to vote. The gold had gone, and there wasn’t a trace of the bushrangers to be seen.’

Outside the hotel the mob had become uproarious.

‘It’s Blake holding forth. You’ll hear “The Wearing of the Green” presently. Come along, Horace. Let us see what they are up to,’ said Hallett. He was very pale. Elsie went out with Ina into the balcony. It was the same voice that she had listened to the evening before.

‘Yes—it’s Blake haranguing his wild Irishmen,’ Hallett said.

Elsie could hear the voice, but she could not see the man. She could tell by the murmurs of the crowd that it was a large crowd and deeply interested. The sensation was curious and intense. The hush was something almost painful during each sentence of the speaker, and then the wild shriek of applause seemed as if it broke irrepressible out of the very heart of the listeners.

‘Blake won’t let his fellows forget all about the election, even in the excitement about Moonlight and the robbery,’ Hallett quietly observed. ‘He’s a better tactician than we are.’ This was the very thought that had been passing through Elsie’s somewhat distracted mind.

She could hardly follow the course of the appeal that Blake was making to his admirers.

It was something about the future of Ireland, and the future, too, of Australia. But she did not want to follow the political appeal. She was content to hear the voice—melodious, strong, thrilling, sweet—with sudden spontaneous notes of humour in it, which brought out roars of laughter from the delighted listeners.

Hallett's turn came to address his electors, and Elsie was near, and could follow his words, but they thrilled her to no enthusiasm. She could not understand why Ina was white and cold with anxiety. What did it matter? What did anything matter? It was the other voice that rang in Elsie's ears. But how could she, in loyalty, hope that Blake might be victorious? Lady Horace made no attempt to do her shopping that day, and the colonial oven was not bought—on this occasion at any rate. The excitement in

Goondi was far too intense for it to be safe for ladies to venture into the business street; the mob too dense and turbulent. Interest was divided between the result of the poll and the bushranging outrage. There was almost a suspension of all other business. Police patrolled the street. The township authorities were waiting for Government orders. Court-house and telegraph station were surrounded by a swaying crowd waiting the arrival of 'progress telegrams.' Captain Macpherson, the superintendent of police, had started out with all the available force. Native trackers were got together, and further bands were being summoned from the neighbouring township. At evening, however, nothing had been heard of Moonlight. He might, as Lord Horace had said, have disappeared into the bowels of the earth, for all the trace he had left

Mr. Blake and his supporters were very much in evidence that day. Elsie saw him in the distance—cool, calm, apparently self-confident. She saw him riding down the street of the township on a horse which was not Osman, but which was, nevertheless, a very splendid animal—a mettlesome chestnut, which apparently he had ridden all through the election, for she heard Hallett and Lord Horace discussing it and extolling the Baròlin breed. She looked at the horse to see if it showed any traces of a wild ride, but it was as fresh, and spirited, and sleek as though it had not left the stable for days. Elsie wondered whether he had really taken that gallop, and if so whether it had, as he had said, worked off the excitement. He certainly seemed now absolutely collected, but perhaps his composure was a sign of excitement at white heat. She observed that during the

early part of the day Trant was not with his partner, and that when he did show himself he seemed by far the most wearied and discomposed of the two.

Elsie watched the fortunes of the day from her balcony. She saw Hallett go into the Court-house up the street, and then Blake came up to the Court-house door and got off his horse and went in too, accompanied by a few friends, and she assumed that the counting of the votes was going on. She went in and out uneasily from and back to the balcony. Some hours after she saw a rush made towards the Court-house by an excited crowd. Presently she heard a wild outcry—at first she hardly knew whether of grief or joy—and then broke out the song of ‘God save Ireland,’ mingled with hurrahs for Blake, and a crowd rushed up waving banners and sticks, some with green ribbons tied to

them, and she knew that the victory was won. The crowd halted under the hotel outside, and Elsie assumed that Blake was there, and that he would have to make another speech. So he did. His voice rang out with all the proud vigour of victory; and she heard him tell of the regeneration of Ireland, and the magnificent destiny of Australia.

Lord Horace had worked manfully. It certainly was not his fault that Frank Hallett was not elected. But when the poll was declared, just before the crowd returned to the hotel, it was known that Blake had come in the victor by a majority of twenty votes.

Again Elsie and Blake met in the corridor. She was coming from her room; he was going towards his. She went straight to him, and held out her hand.

‘I congratulate you,’ she said simply.

‘Thank you,’ he answered, and held her hand for several moments before she withdrew it.

‘But,’ she added, ‘I am very sorry for Mr. Hallett.’

‘He has behaved splendidly,’ said Blake. ‘He is a fine fellow. We shall not bear each other any animosity. He fights fair, and when the fight is over he shakes hands. We have shaken hands, and have agreed to bury personal differences. Political differences, I am afraid, we shall never bury.’

‘Tell me,’ she said abruptly. ‘What did you do last night?’

‘It does not matter, Miss Valliant, since I did not disturb you again. I took care not to do that.’

‘No, you did not disturb me,’ she answered. ‘But I did not go to sleep till nearly daybreak, and Mr. Trant must have come in after that.’

‘Yes, he came in after that.’

‘Your horse did not look as though you had ridden very far last night.’

‘I accomplished my purpose,’ he said; ‘I worked off my excitement.’

‘And you did not meet Moonlight?’

He laughed. ‘So Moonlight was abroad last night.’

‘Strange, wasn’t it?’

‘Captain Macpherson has not caught him yet?’

‘Have you heard?’ she asked.

‘He has not caught him yet. I don’t think he is likely to catch him.’

‘Now that you are member for Luya, Mr. Blake,’ Elsie went on, ‘you will have to do something to preserve the peace of the district.’

‘What should you like me to do?’ he said.
‘Ask a question in the House, and twit the

Government with the fact that all the police of the district are held at bay by an undiscoverable outlaw ?’

‘No ; I don’t want you to deprive us of our chief excitement ; not that it will matter much to me, for I am soon going back to Leichardt’s Town, and frankly, I am full of sympathy for Moonlight. Do you know that one of the troopers says that he speaks a strange language.’

Blake laughed. ‘I understand that he was heard to give an order to fire in French, and Captain Macpherson has started the theory that he is an escaped convict from New Caledonia.’

Lady Horace came out of her room just then, and advanced to her sister and Blake. Her eyes had a frightened look. ‘Elsie,’ she said, ‘I should like to know Mr. Blake.’ She held out her hand with her charming smile.

‘I cannot say that I am glad you have got in, but I am glad, at any rate, that the fight is over.’

‘And the hatchet is buried, Lady Horace,’ said Blake, acknowledging her salutation with a very courtly bow. ‘I suppose you know that the rival candidates and their supporters dine together to-night, and that we shall all make pretty speeches about each other and be good friends henceforth.’

They said a few more words, and then Blake left them. The two sisters went back to the sitting-room. ‘Elsie,’ Ina said on the way thither, ‘don’t begin to flirt with that man.’

‘Why not, dear?’ asked Elsie.

‘Because he will make you do what he likes,’ said Ina; ‘I see it in his eyes.’ The light of a gas jet fell on her agitated face and blurred lashes.

‘Ina, you have been crying,’ exclaimed

Elsie. 'What is the matter? Has Horace been doing anything to vex you?'

'No—I——' Ina stammered. 'I am very happy, Elsie, I'm only sorry for Mr. Hallett; and you don't care. You are wishing joy to the man who has supplanted him. You have nothing kind to say to Frank, who loves you. He is in there waiting, and hoping to see you. Oh, go to him, Elsie, and say that you are sorry.'

Ina pushed Elsie in and ran back to her room.

Frank Hallett was there alone. He was standing by the mantelpiece, and looked grim and sad. It struck her for the first time almost that he, too, looked a man of power. He lifted his head as she entered and smiled.

'You see you were right. I am beaten—but only for the Luya. I shall have another chance directly.'

‘What do you mean? Oh, Frank, I am sorry.’

‘Thank you, Elsie.’ He took her hand in his and held it. ‘Thank you, dear. That makes up for other things. It is an odd chance, isn’t it, that on the very day of my being beaten for the Luya, the Wallaroo vacancy should be declared?’

‘Wallaroo! I hadn’t heard.’

‘Lady Horace knew—it is all over the place. Fletcher has resigned.’

‘Yes, yes, I remember, but I did not connect the two things,’ Elsie stammered. ‘There has been so much to think of—Moonlight and this. You will get in there.’

‘And I have another electioneering campaign before me. It will not be a long one, however, and I don’t start till after the Tunimbah festivities.’

‘You see,’ he added with a rather bitter

little laugh, 'it is as we thought. The trophies of victory have been turned into the symbols of defeat. We shall be celebrating the triumph of my opponent. Blake's first appearance among us will be as the member for Luya.'

'Oh! Frank——'

'Are you sorry, Elsie? Be truthful.'

'Sorry—for your defeat? Of course I am sorry.'

'But for his victory. Are you sorry for that?'

'I don't think you have any right to question me in this way,' she said proudly.

'No, no, I have no right. But I watched your face this morning, and I watched it last evening, when you were listening to him speaking. I saw that you were straining to catch the words. And somehow, Elsie, you don't seem like yourself to-day. You look as though your thoughts were far from Goondi,

and from the election, and from everything that concerns us here.'

'No, Frank, but I am tired. I—I——' There was almost a sob in her voice. 'You are quite right. I am not myself. I don't know what is the matter with me. I did not sleep very well last night.'

'You did not sleep! Did anyone—were you frightened at the noises in the hotel?'

'No.' She hesitated.

'But there were noises,' he said. 'I heard the trampling of horse's feet in the yard. I wondered who could have come so late.'

'It was nothing,' she said hurriedly. 'No, I was not disturbed. Don't think anything more about my looks, Frank, or about things. It doesn't matter, after all, since you are sure to be member for Wallaroo.'

At that moment Lord Horace's voice

sounded in the passage. He ushered in the victorious Blake, pausing as he did so to give some directions to the waiter. 'Heidsieck—spurious, of course, Blake, but not half bad. Hallett, old boy, swallow down animosities; drown 'em in the flowing bowl, and Elsie and Ina must join in. The fight was a fair one, and we're beaten. There's Wallaroo ahead, a dead certainty if ever there was one.'

Hallett came forward, and held out his hand to his rival. 'You are right, Horace, and I congratulate you, Mr. Blake.'

Elsie admired him at the moment very much, but she admired Blake still more, as, with winning courtesy, he responded to Hallett's congratulations.

'If there had been twenty fewer Irishmen in Goondi, you, not I, would have been member for Luya,' he said. 'But, as Lord

Horace says, there's Wallaroo ahead, and we shall fight in the Legislative Assembly yet, Mr. Hallett, in as friendly a fashion, I hope, as we have fought here.'

CHAPTER IX

A BUSH HOUSE PARTY

TUNIMBAH was considered one of the most beautiful stations on the Luya. It was almost in the shadow of Mount Luya and of the twin peaks of the Burrum. Baròlin Gorge—a misty cleft—stretched up between the two into the dividing range, and seemed to Elsie's imagination the passage to a realm of mystery.

Mrs. Jem Hallett had the reputation of being a most accomplished hostess. She was always called Mrs. Jem, because the elder Mrs. Hallett, mother of the two brothers, was still alive, and occupied a pretty cottage about a stone's throw from the big house. But the old lady was an invalid, and took no part in

the domestic management of the station, leaving everything to her clever daughter-in-law. Mrs. Jem was very handsome—a little self-conscious, but that was hardly surprising. She had big black eyes, and, unlike most Australians, a rich colour. She was tall also, and elegant, and always dressed with great care and taste.

Nothing more unlike the Humpey could be imagined. Tunimbah head-station was an imposing stone house with deep verandahs trellised with creepers, a beautifully kept garden, a gravelled courtyard, and beds planted with flowering shrubs and pomegranate trees and camellias. It had out-buildings after the newest and most improved pattern, stables, a retinue of smartly got up black-boys and grooms, trim fences and white gates, and last, but greatest of all, a Chinese cook. The head-station stood on a small

hill, and the garden sloped down to a lagoon, as is the case in many Australian homesteads. Beyond the lagoon was the racecourse, and on this particular occasion—the tenth anniversary of Mr. and Mrs. Jem's wedding-day—there were to be given some bush races—a sort of friendly competition among the horse-owners of the district—which was rather noted for its races—and the horses they intended to run at the forthcoming Leichardt's Town Races.

Mrs. Jem received her principal guests on the verandah facing the courtyard, and herself conducted them to the drawing-room. It was her great aim to be considered English, and she always made a great deal of Lord Horace, who was at his best on these occasions, and imported something of the British country-house element into these bush gatherings. She had been accustomed to rather patronise

the Valliant girls in the days before Ina's marriage, and it had been at her house that Lord Horace first met Ina. She, therefore, took credit to herself for the match.

‘I am so glad you came, dear. Thank you both, love, for your good wishes. Wasn't it a happy idea putting the races on to our wedding-day? Of course we couldn't possibly have had them at the election time. Oh, such a pity, isn't it, about Frank? We had made so sure. But he is quite certain to get in for Wallaroo, and we must just make the best of Mr. Blake, who is quite charming. Such a pity he is on the wrong side, but Jem says, Elsie, that you must convert him.’

Mrs. Jem had quite a number of people already assembled when the Gages and Miss Valliant arrived. Jem Hallett was a handsome, rather heavy squatter, excessively good-natured, but not as clever and enterprising as

his brother. He was far too lazy to go into politics, and contented himself with having the best breed of cattle on the Luya.

Mrs. Jem interrupted her husband's heavy jokes, and sent him off to look after the gentlemen and bring them in to tea. Her drawing-room looked extremely English, with its daintily laid tea-table, and pretty silver things, and with its art muslin draperies and upholstered lounges and arm-chairs. Several ladies were sitting there, and others were playing about in the verandah and on the tennis-lawn. Those in the drawing-room were for the most part matrons, and among them were one or two Leichardt's Town magnates—Lady Garfit, the wife of the Minister for Lands, and her daughter; there was pretty Mrs. Allanby, who gave parties in Leichardt's Town, and whose husband was a stock and station agent; two or three of the neighbour-

ing squatteresses, several young ladies, rivals of Elsie as popular belles, who came in from the verandah when the Gage party appeared. Lady Horace's marriage had produced a certain access of cordiality in the manner of the Leichardt's Town dames, especially now that it was known that Lord and Lady Waveryng were coming out, and would be guests at Government House during the time of the Prince's visit. Formerly, Mrs. Valliant and her pretty daughters had only been admitted on sufferance into the more select circle of Leichardt's Town society, and this gave Elsie Valliant's manner a dash of defiance as she acknowledged their greetings. The girl was full of hatred and malice—at least so she told Ina—and it flashed through her mind that there might be some great person in the Prince's suite who would fall in love with her and marry her, and that she might revenge

herself on these second-rate people for all their slights. She was an undeveloped creature, this poor Elsie. There was nothing very great in her, or very noble. She was full of meannesses and littlenesses and jealousies, for which she despised herself in her more exalted moments, but there had never come anything into her life to call forth higher sentiments. She sometimes fancied that if such thing did come, she, too, could prove herself heroic. Ina was better than she. No one acknowledged that more readily than Elsie. But then Ina had not been the idol of a foolish mother, and Ina had never been a beauty.

Elsie had never looked more lovely than she did that evening when she went into the drawing-room dressed for dinner. She and Ina had spent some time in the concoction of the costume, and then Elsie had had a fit of

penitence, and had insisted on making something lovely for Ina, too. It struck Elsie that Ina seemed shy and agitated, and she wondered if Lord Horace had been cross. Now that the blush of the honeymoon was over, Lord Horace had fits of downright crossness. And Lord Horace was certainly selfish and exacting. He made his wife do things for him that he would not have required from a Lady Clara Vere-de-Vere. This Elsie resented. What right had he to expect that her sister would act as his valet? Ina did everything that he asked her, and was patient and sweet as far-famed Grizel. But she always said that she was happy.

Frank Hallett took Elsie in to dinner. Lord Horace naturally conducted Mrs. Jem, and Mr. Blake was given to Lady Horace. Mrs. Jem had waived the rules of strict etiquette so far as to give Lady Garfit the precedence

over sometime Ina Valliant. Blake and Ina were seated opposite Elsie and Frank. Somehow, whenever she glanced across the table, Elsie seemed to meet Blake's eyes. He had such odd eyes—so deep and piercing. She could never forget their wild gleam on that strange night at Goondi. Blake had a stephanotis flower in his buttonhole. So had Frank Hallett. She remembered having said to Blake one day at Goondi—the day after the declaration of the poll, when they had walked down the street of the township while waiting for the coach, and to hear the latest news of Moonlight, or rather to hear the news of Moonlight's vain pursuers—that the stephanotis was her favourite flower. Blake's voice enchained her attention, and made her listen carelessly to what Frank Hallett was saying. She wondered what Blake was talking about to Ina. She felt almost certain

from the way they both looked at her that she herself was the subject of conversation.

She was the subject also of Mr. Dominic Trant's regard. He was on her other side, and devoted much more consideration to her than to his legitimate partner. He would insist upon discoursing about Blake in what Elsie felt to be rather a crude fashion.

‘You remember what I said to you the other night, Miss Valliant?’

‘I am not sure that I do, Mr. Trant.’

‘I told you that my partner was rather a dangerous customer. You know there's such a thing as the biter getting bit. Any woman who plays with Blake will find that she is playing with fire.’

‘I don't understand you, Mr. Trant; or how what you say can in any way apply to me.’

‘They say you are a flirt. So is Blake.’

‘Well?’

‘He never cared for a woman in his life, Miss Valliant; but it has always been with him as it is with the sportsman after game. The more difficult it is to get, the more fellows there are after it, the more determined he is that it should fall to his gun. Blake would follow a woman he thought worth his trouble through thick and thin till he had got her down at his feet.’

‘And then?’

‘Why, then, Miss Valliant, he’d tell her that he had no heart to give, and he would leave her to further enjoy the excitement of going after other game. That is all Blake cares for—the excitement of doing what other people have failed to do.’

‘And so,’ said Elsie, ‘Mr. Blake goes about with women’s scalps at his belt, and you fancy that he might do me the honour of wishing to adorn himself with mine. It

is very kind of you to warn me. Why are you so interested in my welfare?'

'Because I want you for myself,' said Trant brutally.

'That is very kind of you, too,' said Elsie. 'I like your way of playing a game, Mr. Trant. It is honest, at any rate.' She turned to Frank Hallett, and pointedly avoided Trant. He came up to her, however, as soon as dinner was over.

'I have come to beg your pardon. I'm a rough brute. I throw myself on your mercy.'

'Please don't offend again, then,' said Elsie.

'I'll go on my knees to you if you like. I'll promise anything. The only thing I'm good for is to sing. Mrs. Jem Hallett has asked me to sing. You'll forgive me when you hear me sing. I am going to sing something to *you*.'

The man was right. His merit lay in his

voice. It was impossible not to be moved by his singing. They were all sitting out in the verandah or strolling about the starlit garden, which was full of the scent of stephanotis, verbenas, and Cape jasmine. Mrs. Jem had started music in the drawing-room, while the dining-room, which was a great room with a polished floor, was being got ready for dancing. Elsie had already a little crowd of men round her. Several were Leichardt's Town admirers. The old fever for admiration was upon her. From one she accepted a flower. To another she gave one. She had smiles for all. Then Trant began to sing. A vague emotion seized her, a sudden irresistible longing for the deeper drama of life. There was so much beyond all this flirting and dancing and dressing, so much of which she was totally ignorant. Even Trant with the coarse passion in his voice represented a

world of feeling that she had never entered. She became silent, and would not answer the young men's banal remarks.

'Hush—go away, I want to listen,' she said, and sat there, her profile outlined against dark night, the light from the drawing-room upon her serious face and shining eyes and slender girlish form; she sat with her hands folded, quite still. Someone came and leaned against the verandah post by her side. She knew without looking at him that it was Blake. She knew, too, that he was watching her, and the feeling gave her an odd thrill and presently drew her eyes to his. Trant's songs ceased; and his accompanist went on playing desultory chords.

Mr. Blake said suddenly, 'Do you do anything—I mean in the way of music?'

'No,' answered Elsie. 'I do nothing—nothing at least that gives people pleasure.'

‘I should say that you did a great deal which gave people pleasure. You exist—that is something.’

‘I wish you wouldn’t pay me compliments in that unmeaning way. I hate it. It is like everybody else.’

‘You would like me then to be unlike everybody else. Thank you. I like you to say that.’

‘Why?’

‘Because it shows that you think about me.’

‘I don’t see that that matters.’

‘Oh yes, it does—to me. I have been watching you, Miss Valliant, wondering——’

‘Wondering what?’

‘Wondering what lies underneath the butterfly existence you seem to lead.’

‘Ah! you think I am a butterfly.’

‘I think that you know how to *papillonner*

la vie—as one says, but that is a different thing from being a butterfly.’

‘I don’t understand much French, but I understand enough to know what that means.’

‘It is a great art to *papillonner la vie*.’

‘Do you practise it?’ she asked.

‘I try to. But I have moods in which life seems deadly serious.’

‘Were you in one of those moods that night?’

‘Ah! No, I was in a reckless mood that night. I have quite got over it now.’

‘And you are in the butterfly phase,’ she said a little bitterly.

‘Why do you say that in such a contemptuous way?’

‘I was thinking of something Mr. Trant told me about you.’

‘What was that?’

‘I don’t think I ought to tell you.’

‘I can guess what it was. Trant reproaches me with liking ladies’ society too much. I am sure he told you that I was a flirt.’

‘Yes, he said something of that kind, only he put it more strongly.’

‘How? You needn’t mind telling me what Trant said about me. I am sure that he has often said the same things to my face.’

‘So he told me.’

‘He warned you against me, didn’t he?’

‘Yes——’

‘And he described me as a conceited cad who tried to be a lady-killer?’

‘No, he didn’t say that. He described you as a person who liked to make women fall in love with him, and who went about with hearts as trophies in the way that an Indian carries scalps.’

‘Oh ! That was putting it melodramatically. Miss Valliant, perhaps you think me a conceited cad when I say that the game of love—or flirtation—has given me some amusement in my life, but that when I found it becoming serious for myself, or for the other person, I have always stopped short, unless——’

‘Well, unless?’

‘Unless it was a fair contest. Hearts not in it. The best fighter to win, and friends when the fight is over ; like our election the other day. Isn’t that your idea of a flirtation tournament?’

‘Yes—perhaps—I haven’t any theory about it.’

‘You only practise the game. Well, don’t you think that two skilled players might get a good deal of fun out of such a game?’

‘I don’t know.’ Elsie was getting a little

uncomfortable, and at the same time was deeply interested.

‘Oh yes, you do. Because Trant implied that in this instance it is a case of Greek meeting Greek. Well, Miss Valliant, is it a challenge?’

‘If you like to take it so,’ she answered recklessly. There was a silence.

‘Yes, I do,’ he answered seriously. ‘I think it is very likely that I shall get beaten; but I accept the challenge. Will you dance this with me?’ he asked in a matter-of-fact tone. ‘That is a waltz, isn’t it?’

She got up. At that moment Frank Hallett came up.

‘Miss Valliant, you will give me this?’

Elsie hesitated. Blake said nothing, but his eyes were on her. ‘I am engaged to Mr. Blake,’ she said at last.

Frank Hallett drew back.

‘The one after the next, then? I am going to dance the next with your sister.’

Elsie nodded. ‘Yes, the one after the next.’

She took Blake’s arm and they went into the dancing-room. He danced extremely well. So did she. Elsie had never felt before during a dance as she felt now. She had at once a sense of intoxication and terror. She had begun to be afraid of Blake, and she had never in her life been afraid of any man. What had he meant by asking her if she had given him a challenge? What did he think of her? What had he heard about her? Well, she would show him that she could take care of herself.

The waltz ended, and they strolled into the garden. The moon was rising, and threw fantastic shadows upon the gravelled walk.

‘Mr. Blake,’ Elsie said suddenly, ‘will

you please tell me what you meant when you told me that day by the creek—the day I threw the flower at your horse—that you had been wishing to make my acquaintance for a particular reason? Will you tell me what the reason was?’

‘If you wish it,’ he said; ‘but it is rather a long story. I don’t think I can get it into the interval between this and the next dance.’

‘I am not engaged for the next dance. We will sit it out—unless you want to dance.’

‘No. It seems absurd to say that I would much rather sit it out with you.’

‘Why absurd?’

‘You forbade me to pay you compliments,’ he answered.

They turned towards the lagoon, out of the track of promenaders. There was an avenue of bunyas leading to the boathouse,

and the dark pyramidal pine trees looked strangely solemn in the moonlight. Elsie gave a little shiver.

‘I hate this walk. It puts me in mind of a churchyard. Come down here. There’s a seat close to the house, and I shall be able to hear when the waltz begins.’

She took him into a vine trellis to the right, and they sat down on a bench which was placed in a sort of arbour.

CHAPTER X

JENSEN'S GHOST

‘WELL!’ she said. ‘Why?’

‘Why!’ he repeated. ‘Do you know any people at Teebar?’

‘No,’ she answered, and blushed at one of her most painful recollections which the name evoked. ‘At least not now.’

‘No; because the person you once knew, and who lived there, is dead. He was a man called Jensen. I knew him very well. He had a station close by the township.’

‘Yes,’ she said, in a stifled way.

‘He took to drinking, as you know, and killed himself.’

‘I did not know. Killed himself!’

‘As surely as any man who ever blew his brains out. He did not drink, did he, when you knew him?’

‘No. Mr. Blake, I know what you mean, and it is cruel, it is wicked to blame me for that.’ She half rose in her agitation. ‘It wasn’t my fault that he——’

‘That he loved you. No, that was certainly not your fault. There must be a great many men who love you. But I was sorry for poor Jensen. He looked a stupid fellow when I knew him, but he was clever enough to write very decent verse. And he looked rather a weak creature, but he was strong enough to be faithful to the one woman he ever loved.’

‘What did he tell you about me? Don’t be afraid of hurting me.’

‘He told me all that had ever passed between you—his version of course—but it

was so detailed that I think it must have been pretty near the truth. You encouraged him a good deal.'

'Yes—I encouraged him.'

'I think you were engaged to him for two days?'

'I—I said I would marry him—if I could like him well enough.'

'And at the end of two days—you didn't give it a long trial—you told him that you had only engaged yourself for an experiment, to see what it felt like, and you threw him over.'

'Yes, that is true. I couldn't care for him enough.'

There was a silence. At last he said, 'I saw a good deal of Jensen. I did what I could to reclaim him, but he said he had no faith in man nor woman, and no motive for living. From what I could gather, he used to

be a healthy-minded man, fond of sport and of work, and not disposed to take a morbid view of life. You will understand that I was naturally anxious to meet the lady who had been able to effect such a change, but besides, all that he told me about you made me feel that you would be interesting.'

Elsie seemed to be strangling emotion. She spoke in a hard voice, cut once or twice with a dry sob, and with her face turned from him.

'I know what you must think of me. You must think that I am fair game for anybody. You must think that I am as bad as a woman can be. I am certainly not going to excuse myself. I only want to say that I was very young, and that I had never felt deeply about anything, and had no idea that anyone else could feel in that way. I want to say, too,

that I had been brought up to think that I must marry well——’

‘And Jensen was very well off. Yes, I know.’

‘It is horrible. It is humiliating. It is utterly undignified. When I think of it my cheeks burn, and I loathe myself. Do you know,’ her voice dropped though she spoke with passionate vehemence, ‘he is the only man—except my father—who has ever kissed me. I hate him for that.’

Blake uttered an exclamation of mingled surprise and sympathy. He had never dreamed of this odd kind of virginal pride in Elsie. Her curious unconventionality, her impulsive speech, all that he had heard of her had prepared him for a different sort of woman.

Elsie went on still in that hurried vehement way. ‘I hated him the day he did that, and I told him so. I suppose he told you

that. I felt that I never wanted to see him again—to be taken possession of—that wasn't what I meant. It is quite true that I had had a fancy that it might be amusing to be engaged. I have always had a curiosity about life and about different kinds of experience. I thought that I should have an entirely new set of feelings, and that this was to be the door to them. You can't imagine anything more childish, and stupid, and ignorant. I don't know why I am telling you all this. I hate myself for doing so.'

'Don't do that,' he said in a different manner from his former one. 'I am very glad that you have told me.'

'I have been trying to forget it all. I would never let myself think of it. I heard that he had died, but I did not know how. As I got to know other men, and saw for how little flirtation counted, and how soon they

got over disappointments of that kind, I got to think less about it. And then I never felt deeply about anybody, and how could I know——'

'That anybody might come to feel deeply about you? And so you have gone on flirting with men, and liking them, perhaps, until they too have wanted to take possession of you, and then that fierce thing in you has roused up and has made you cruel. You have never yet met your match—quite.'

The 'quite' was an afterthought. He was thinking of Frank Hallett.

'I hope,' he went on, 'that you won't find your match after you are married. That would be the worst misfortune that could happen to you.'

'Why do you say that?' she asked.

'Because all that you have told me makes me certain that you have the capacity for a

feeling which when it comes will almost frighten you.'

'Could one be frightened of love?' she said softly. 'I have often wished that I could really love someone.'

'Don't wish it—unless you are quite certain that the man you love is worthy of your love and capable of giving you back all that you give—don't wish it unless you are certain, too, that the man you love can marry you.'

She shrank together a little. 'I think we had better go in,' she said. 'The dance will begin presently.'

He got up and gravely offered her his arm. 'Miss Valliant, you are going back soon to Leichardt's Town. Will you allow me to call upon you and your mother?'

'Yes, certainly,' she answered, and added, 'We live on Emu Point.'

They walked towards the house. Before they reached the verandah, Elsie stopped and faced him. 'I am very sorry for what I said to you this evening,' she said impulsively. 'I hope you will forget it.'

'I am afraid that I can't promise to do that,' he answered.

'Then at least you will not remind me of it.'

'Ah! that of course I can promise. As far as lies in my power I will try not to remind you of it.'

'Thank you. I think that I will sit down here. If you see Mr. Frank Hallett will you tell him where I am?'

He left her. She had not long to wait. Frank Hallett was walking up and down with Lady Horace, and he had seen her come back with Blake. They both came to her.

'Elsie,' Ina said, 'what is the matter?'

‘Nothing,’ said Elsie. ‘Why?’

‘You look scared somehow.’

‘I think it must be because I have been seeing ghosts,’ said Elsie tremulously.

‘Ghosts!’ repeated Lady Horace.

Elsie did not answer.

‘It must have been the effect of the moonlight in the garden,’ said Hallett. ‘Those pyramids of *rhynga-sporum* do look rather like white ghosts.’

Elsie burst into a laugh.

‘How like you that speech was! You are really a very comforting person. You always find a natural and reasonable explanation for all one’s vagaries, for all one’s stupid superstitious fancies.’

‘I am glad,’ he said gravely, ‘that you find me a comforting person. But I don’t think that is what you like best.’

‘What is it that I like best?’

‘Something more romantic. I know that I am a very prosaic kind of fellow. But perhaps that wears best in the long run, and most stupid superstitious fancies do admit of a reasonable and natural explanation.’

They began to dance. The waltz with him was not quite like the one with Blake. She was conscious of this, and she was angry with herself for being so. Why should a girl, when two men waltz equally well, feel a subtler intoxication in the contact and joint motion with the one than with the other? They had only taken a few turns when she stopped him.

‘I don’t want to dance. I’m tired.’

They went out into the verandah again. He was concerned.

‘Something is the matter with you.’

‘No. Yes—everything is the matter.’

‘Tell me, Elsie,’ he said.

‘Frank, if I ever give you bad pain—if you are misled by your own fancies, and think me better, and truer, and more sincere than I am, and wake up to find that I am a vain, ambitious, mercenary girl, with no real thought for anyone but herself, don’t say that I haven’t warned you.’

‘You have warned me often enough, and I told you that I was quite contented to take the risk. I can’t bear you to talk like that, and yet I’m glad too.’

‘Tell me why you are glad.’

‘Because if you weren’t getting to care for me a little, you wouldn’t be troubled—at the thought of the suffering you might cause me.’

‘I am troubled—horribly troubled. And of course I care a little for you. I care a

great deal, but it isn't the sort of caring I mean.'

'The sort of caring you mean is a romantic dream—the glamour that never was on sea or land, but only in the imagination of romance writers. I don't mind entering the lists with your Prince, Elsie dear. I can wait. He won't come along. Princes like that don't ride through the gum trees.'

'Now,' she said seriously, 'it pleases me to hear you talk like that. It makes me feel that you are strong. I wish that you were strong enough to carry me off and put an end to my doubts for ever.'

'Shall I try?'

'No, no. Give me my year. Frank, I do want to care for you. I am grateful to you for loving me. You'll believe that.'

Elsie slept badly that night. They had

danced till long past midnight, and she had tried to drown her guilty recollection of poor Jensen. She had danced again with Blake, and they had talked in the verandah afterwards, not of personal topics—with a tact which she appreciated he avoided allusion to their previous conversation—but of travel, of men and women and books, of life on the Luya and of the wider life beyond. And she had danced with Trant, and he had been very personal, and had expressed his admiration with a certain respectful bluntness which had amused her, and had done more than anything else to distract her thoughts from more painful subjects. She told herself that if he was a little rough he meant no harm; and that his roughness was of a more interesting kind than that of the Luya squatters in general. Elsie was not very fond of bushmen. She preferred the Bank clerks

and young Civil servants of Leichardt's Town.

She had danced, too, more than once again with Hallett, and she was doing her very best to persuade herself that the regard she felt for Frank Hallett was the nearest approach she should ever get to love. And then she had seen very plainly that Lady Garfit and her daughter were making up to the Halletts, and that Frank was clearly an object of desire in matrimonial circles. It was perfectly evident that Rose Garfit was in love with him. Rose was another type of the Leichardt's Town belles. She was not soft and slender and complex, like Elsie, but was a great Junoesque creature, with calm blue eyes and quantities of flaxen hair, a downright sort of girl, absolutely goodnatured, a splendid horsewoman, a good tennis-player, always bright and smiling and equable, and in every

way a desirable wife for a well-to-do squatter. Elsie did not actually dislike Rose, who did not want to give herself airs, though she had always seemed to hold herself aloof in a calmly superior way from the lesser fry of Leichardt's Town. This was because of her father's position, and because she was always better dressed, and had carriages and riding-horses, which she—poor Elsie—never had unless some obliging admirer gave her a mount. But Elsie hated Lady Garfit with a holy hatred, for Lady Garfit had snubbed her on more than one occasion, and had done all she could to keep Elsie out of the Government House set, promulgating the report that she was fast and bad style, and even that she rouged. Elsie would have done anything to annoy Lady Garfit, and it was very evident that Lady Garfit was extremely annoyed at Frank Hallett's devotion.

There were other ladies, too, before whom Elsie was not displeased to parade her conquests. She could see that Mrs. Allanby was furious because she had sat out with Mr. Blake, and because Frank Hallett had forgotten a dance for which he was engaged to her, while he in his turn was sitting out with Elsie. But Mrs. Allanby revenged herself by flirting with Lord Horace. And then there was Minna Pryde, of Leichardt's Town, who was more on Elsie's social level than Rose Garfit, who never lost an opportunity of, as she put it, 'spiting' Elsie about her 'beaux.' Minna was dark, and pretty and vivacious, and was certainly not good style, and not at all in favour with the more fastidious of the Leichardt's Town matrons. Elsie was also rather pleased to vex Mrs. Jem, who patronised her, and who, she knew, would have preferred Rose Garfit for a sister-in-law. These uncharit-

able motives had been more or less preponderant all the evening, but in the stillness of her chamber they melted into a rain of tears. She did not dare to cry out aloud, lest she should wake Ina. The two sisters shared a tiny verandah room, Lord Horace having been sent, with almost all the other gentlemen, to the bachelors' quarters, where, judging from the sounds of revelry that floated on the night, he was doubtless enjoying himself.

CHAPTER XI

ON THE RACECOURSE

THE head station at Tunimbah was astir betimes, and long before the big bell clanged for breakfast, preparations on the racecourse had begun, and flags marked the line of running, and waved on the top of an extemporised Grand Stand. Frank Hallett was waiting in the verandah when Lady Horace and Elsie came out. They were in their habits, like most of the other ladies, since nearly everybody was to ride to the course.

‘I thought you might like me to show you your places at the breakfast table,’ he said. ‘Most have gone in. There are a

quantity of people here already, and more coming from everywhere.'

Breakfast was not in the dining-room to-day, but in the old woolshed—a large slab bark building, about a hundred yards beyond the courtyard, which was always utilised on these occasions, and in which they were to dance in the evening. Tunimbah had once been a sheep-station, in the days before the Halletts had bought it, but sheep did not do well on the Luya. On an Australian station an 'old woolshed' is an institution, and the homestead which possesses one is usually the centre for the festivities of the district.

It was a queer picturesque place, with its dark walls, and beamed and raftered ceiling, and it had been decorated with creepers from the scrub, and now looked very gay indeed, filled with a chattering crowd—bushmen in immaculate moleskins and flaring ties, and with

a generally brown, healthy, and excited appearance ; ladies in habits, some of home manufacture, others the product of Leichardt's Town tailors, so that there were all varieties, from the honest brown and grey wincey to the Park turn-out with high hats and boots. The girls were, many of them, very coquettishly got up, and stephanotis was in favour for a breast-knot.

Outside, a good many men were lounging about discussing the merits of their horses, settling matters with their jockeys, and taking notes of the new competitors. There was a good deal of interest in the Baròlin horses. The breed was getting a name, and Trant, to use a colonialism, was 'blowing' loudly about his chances of taking the Luya Cup, and cutting out Frank Hallett, who had won it the previous year, with his thoroughbred Gipsy Girl.

Mr. Blake came up and shook hands with Lady Horace and her sister.

‘I have been waiting for you,’ he said to Elsie, as they fell back a little—‘because I want to sit next you, if I may, and also because I want to ask you if you will ride a horse of mine, which is a perfect ladies’ hack, on the course to-day. I heard you telling Lord Horace last night that you didn’t like the one you rode from the Dell.’

‘Thank you,’ said Elsie. ‘I should like to ride your horse. But Mr. Frank Hallett has offered me one. I am the luckiest young woman in the world. Everybody has offered me horses.’

‘Then your only difficulty will be in selecting,’ said Blake.

‘I like riding new horses,’ said Elsie.

‘Then,’ said Frank Hallett a little stiffly, but feeling that he was magnanimous, and

that he could afford to be so, 'you will perhaps be wise to accept Mr. Blake's offer. If it is the horse he rode yesterday you will be much better mounted than on mine.'

He turned again to Lady Horace.

'Mr. Hallett is very generous,' said Blake.

'Is it Osman?' said Elsie, ignoring the remark. 'The horse that nearly knocked you against a tree that day at the Crossing.'

He gave a little start. 'No. I wouldn't put you on that horse.'

'I shouldn't be at all afraid of him. I never saw such a beauty. Perhaps you will be astonished to hear, Mr. Blake, considering I am a town girl, that I don't mind what I sit, short of a regular buck-jumper. I can even manage a little mild pig-jumping.'

He laughed. 'This horse won't even

pig-jump. And I am not surprised at hearing of your being able to do anything—that is courageous and interesting.’

‘Thank you. But the last clause was such an evident afterthought that I don’t know whether to take that speech as a compliment or not. And you know you weren’t to pay me compliments. Mr. Blake, can you imagine what is the one passionate desire of my life—at present?’

‘Please tell me?’

‘To have a gallop on Moonlight’s Abatos.’

‘It is possible that you may attain even that summit of bliss, if, as you once suggested, Moonlight were to carry you off.’

Elsie laughed. ‘Moonlight isn’t in the least likely to show himself in the district, while Captain Macpherson and his men are hanging round. Did you know that he was to be here to-day?’

‘Who—Moonlight?’ asked Mr. Dominic Trant, who had joined them.

‘Good-morning, Mr. Trant,’ said Elsie, turning. ‘No, not Moonlight; but Captain Macpherson. What an odd expression you have got on your face! What are you thinking of?’ Trant burst into a laugh.

‘I was thinking, Miss Valliant, what a curious dramatic sort of thing it would be if Moonlight and Captain Macpherson were to meet here as fellow-guests. It’s not impossible, you know.’

‘It strikes me as most improbable,’ said Elsie with gravity. She thought Trant’s laugh rather familiar, and certainly ill-timed. ‘At least I hope so, for Moonlight’s sake. I always confess to a strong admiration for Moonlight—and I hope so for Mr. Hallett’s sake too. This is not a public racecourse. The people here are his friends.’

Trant laughed again in a sort of *sotto-voce* manner. Blake was evidently thinking of something else. His brows were knit, and his eyes gleamed darkly from beneath them. They went up the wooden slope to the woolshed, and Hallett showed Elsie and Lady Horace their places. He put himself on one side of Elsie. Blake took the seat on the other. He had lingered to say a word or two to Trant.

‘Are you going to run Osman for the cup?’ Elsie asked.

‘I am not sure. He is entered, but I believe Trant has withdrawn him. Tell me who is that opposite—the man with the sprouting beard who looks like a jockey.’

Before Elsie could reply the question was answered by a young Irishman from a station over the border—Mick Mahoney he was named—who called across:

‘And is it after the Scriptures that you are taking a pattern, Captain Macpherson, and are ye making a vow not to cut your beard till Moonlight’s brought to justice? I’m thinking that at this rate ye’ll have it to your waist.’

‘Come, I’ve had enough of chaffing about Moonlight,’ answered Captain Macpherson good-humouredly, ‘and you might let a chap enjoy his day off once in a way. I’ve scoured the Luya from top to bottom—not a trace of him have I found.’

‘And been in some pretty queer places, I’ll be bound,’ remarked an elderly squatter. ‘It’s an awful rough country is the Upper Luya.’

‘Captain Macpherson,’ put in Elsie Valliant, ‘did you go to the Baròlin Fall?’

‘As near as we could get, Miss Valliant, and I wish I might catch Moonlight making for that blind alley. But he is too cute, and knows the country far too well.’

‘It’s a *cul-de-sac*, is it?’ asked Mr. Blake, bending forward and courteously addressing the police officer. ‘I believe you have been at Baròlin Gorge, Captain Macpherson, and know my partner, Dominic Trant?’

‘Oh, to be sure. Mr. Blake, is it? Allow me to congratulate you on your victory—saving your presence, Mr. Frank Hallett, but I am not altogether at one with the squatterarchy, as you know. I’m half a Liberal in Australia—was an out-and-out one in England, which comes to the same thing.’

Captain Macpherson laughed in his breezy way. When not in harness he was a rather happy-go-lucky person, though he was grim and daring enough on the trail. ‘Your partner, he’s down there, isn’t he?’ and Captain Macpherson nodded cheerily to Trant. ‘How d’ye do? Yes, he was most obliging, was Mr. Trant. Showed us all about, and gave

my men fresh horses; put us on a wrong scent, too, with the best intentions in the world. That was a most harmless and respectable horse-breaker, Trant, that we followed like grim death across the border.'

'So I heard afterwards,' said Mr. Trant imperturbably. 'But he sounded uncommonly like Moonlight.'

'Tell me about the Baròlin Fall,' said Elsie.

'It is worth seeing, I can tell you, Miss Valliant, but you have to work your way through a bunya scrub to get to it. And there's a funny thing. None of the black trackers will go near the place. You'd have thought a year or two in the Native Police would have cured their superstition, but my theory is that the Australian nigger is only beaten by the West Indian for sheer terror of what he thinks is the supernatural.'

‘No one seems to know where the fall comes from,’ said Hallett. ‘They say that it’s the lake on the top of Mount Luya, which was once the crater of an extinct volcano, and has worked underground to the precipice.’

‘Tis a big body of water,’ said Captain Macpherson. ‘You were asking if the place is a *cul-de-sac*. You might have nicked a bit out of the mountain for all the outlet there is. It’s a sheer precipice on each side of you, with a waterfall at the end of it.’

‘I want to go there,’ said Elsie. ‘Mr. Hallett, remember that you have promised to get up a picnic, and that we are to camp out for a night.’

‘You must wait a bit then,’ said Captain Macpherson. ‘There’d be no use in ladies trying it after the rainy season. We got bogged the other day. I’d put it off till the spring, Miss Valliant.’

‘Is it a promise?—in the spring?’ asked Elsie, turning with a bewitching smile to Frank. ‘Come, I don’t often ask you anything.’

‘Certainly, it is a promise,’ he answered.

‘I shall keep you to it. And you, Mr. Blake, you are to be one of the party.’

‘I was going to suggest that you should make the expedition from our place,’ said Blake. ‘It is quite ten miles nearer, and if we are rough, Miss Valliant, we are at least picturesque.’

‘When is it spring?’ said Elsie, with pretty imperiousness, turning to Hallett. ‘Please soon make it spring.’

‘I am afraid it can’t be managed before the end of August,’ said Hallett, ‘and even then it would be cold for camping out.’

‘The end of August then,’ said Elsie. ‘That is settled. I look to you to square Mrs.

Jem. The end of August!' she repeated. 'Who knows what may have happened before then?'

Mrs. Jem had got up from the table. The men were anxious to be at the course. Outside the woolshed blackboys in clean shirts and with new scarlet handkerchiefs round their waists were leading horses in side-saddles up and down. The gins and piccaninnies had come from the blacks' camp to see the start. They made impish noises and screamed out admiring remarks as the mounting went on.

'My word, Budgery that fellow!' was the exclamation that followed Elsie.

'I say, Elsie,' cried a toothless blear-eyed creature, plentifully tattooed, with a yellow bandana binding her woolly locks and an old pink tea-gown of Mrs. Jem's slung across her shoulder, 'what for you got him new

Benjamin? Mine think it Frank cobbon coola along of you.'

'Is that true?' said Blake. 'Is Mr. Frank Hallett very angry with you? Does he mind your riding my horse?'

'No, why should he?' she answered.

'*I* should mind very much if you rode *his* horse after having promised to ride mine.'

'Is this my horse?' she asked, pointing to a beautiful bay, which was held not by a blackboy, but by a rather flash-looking stockman—a rakish young Australian, with a fair moustache, twisted on each side to a fine point, and odd down-looking eyes. He was a fine upstanding fellow, lean and muscular, and had the gait of a man born or bred on horseback. It was said on the Luya that there had never been foaled the animal that Sam Shehan couldn't ride. He had been well

* Cobbon coola—very angry.

known in the district from a boy, and was supposed to have done a little cattle-duffing, as it is called, in his younger days, but he had reformed entirely since taking a place with Trant & Blake of Baròlin Gorge, and was such a good hand with stock that the neighbouring squatters were always glad to get him over for a day or two at mustering times

‘Yes, this is the Outlaw,’ said Blake.
‘How is he this morning, Shehan?’

‘Quiet as a lamb,’ said Shehan, ‘and fresh as a daisy, Miss. He’s a bit of a speeler. He’d lick the lot of ’em if he was put into training.’

Elsie put her foot into Blake’s hand, and he lifted her into the saddle. Hallett was watching him jealously. Lord Horace had given Hallett charge of Ina. He himself was careering about the course, and had made a rather heavy book upon the races.

Behind Sam Shehan were two other

Baròlin hands—twin half-caste boys, who had come in Shehan's train to Baròlin, and who had also turned into reformed characters under Trant's tutelage. Pompo and Jack Nutty used to have the reputation of being up to any kind of devilment in the old days, and they, too, were magnificent horsemen, and invaluable at Luya musterings, because they knew every inch of the country.

Blake mounted his own horse, which was a fiery creature, but not the black one he had been riding on the day he first met Elsie. Baròlin was famous for its horses, and Dominic Trant was no less well mounted. He had a scowling expression on his dark face as he passed Elsie and his partner, but he made no attempt to join them. Elsie was the object of attention to a bevy of young men, but it was a tribute to Blake's power that no one thought of interfering with him.

In an Australian March, one may sometimes have a delightful day, with just a fresh faint foretaste of winter in the air. Sometimes, on the other hand, an Australian March is as muggy and disagreeable a month as can well be imagined. To-day it was bright and clear. There had been a heavy rain a few days previously, and the world looked as if it had been well washed. Never was sky bluer. There was a faint breeze stirring the tops of the gum-trees, and throwing a ripple on to the surface of the lagoon. The grass—where it had not been trodden down by the racers exercising—was thick and lush, and brown with its autumn heads. But the yellowing quinces and swelling oranges and the great pumpkins and squashes were the only sign of autumn. As they rode down by the garden fence, the enclosure was spring-like in its bloom. The prickly pears were growing

faintly pink, it is true, and the passion-creeper hung out purple eggs, but the roses massed in quantities—golden Maréchal Neils and pale tea-roses, flaunting cabbage-roses, and dark delicate cottage beauties—a most sweet and gorgeous array. And there was a plant of the Taverna Montana in bloom, its dazzling white flowers nearly as large as a camellia. And the honeysuckle and stephanotis scented the air, and the great vermilion pomegranates were like blobs of sealing-wax thrown at haphazard upon the green.

It was a day to intoxicate the senses.

‘Who says that the Australian birds have no song?’ said Elsie. ‘There’s a magpie gurgling away as if he meant to sing at a concert to-night.’

Blake smiled at her, and she smiled back in return. She had forgotten Jensen. She had forgotten her half-promise to Frank

Hallett. She had forgotten to ask herself whether or not she could ever love him. She only knew that she was happy, and that the air was sweet, and that Blake looked at her in a way in which no one else had ever looked. There was a grassy track—once the path for water-carts in primitive days, before the erection of the grand pump.

The Outlaw bounded forward.

‘Oh, let us have one canter along here,’ Elsie cried. ‘I want to try the Outlaw. One canter by the creek. Come, Mr. Blake.’

She rode on, shaking the reins and patting the animal’s sleek neck, as he danced and curvetted. She looked back at Blake, and laughed like a child. How beautiful she was, and how splendidly she rode! They rode on away from the crowd, cantering, almost galloping, always fast, fast, clearing the little logs and gullies in the way, all along the home

paddock and never pulling up till they were at least two miles from the station.

‘What will they think?’ she said, reining the Outlaw. ‘Oh, what a glorious spin! Tell me, aren’t you happy when you are going fast like that?’

‘Do you call that fast?’ he said. ‘Ah, you should know what it is to ride for one’s life.’

‘Have you ever ridden for your life?’ she asked, suddenly becoming serious.

‘Yes,’ he answered, ‘and I have enjoyed it as I have never enjoyed anything in the world. Oh, to feel that your life—your very life—all the glory and beauty of this glorious and beautiful world—all the past, and the present, and the future—ambition, hope, a Cause perhaps—all depending on the speed of an animal and lying in the mad rush forwards. There’s a wild sense of irresponsibility about

a moment like that which I can't describe—
can't give you the feeblest idea of. Your will
seems to have got outside you, and to be in
the night, and the trees, and the free birds
and beasts. Every nerve is strung to an
excitement which is rapture. It's the very
essence of the joy of life.'

CHAPTER XII

BEELZEBUB'S COLOURS

THE first race was over when Elsie and Blake reached the course. What could they have been talking about during that homeward ride, to make them linger so long? She had a bunch of wild jasmine in her bodice, which he had gathered for her, and she had promised him more dances than she could remember.

Lady Horace looked distressed. 'Oh, Elsie, don't flirt with that man,' she whispered to her sister, repeating the former frightened adjuration. 'I know that it will bring you harm. Don't make poor Frank unhappy.'

'You seem to think a great deal more of Frank's happiness, or unhappiness, than you

do of mine, Ina,' said Elsie poutingly. 'It's enough to make Horace jealous.'

Lady Horace flushed deeply. 'Don't say that; don't ever say that,' she exclaimed. 'You have no right to say such a thing.'

'Horace *is* jealous, is he?' exclaimed Elsie. 'Well, that's better at any rate than being sulky over his dinner, or running after that horrid Mrs. Allanby.'

Lord Horace, however, certainly showed no signs of jealousy. He was in very high spirits, for he had won his first bet, and he had tacked himself to pretty Mrs. Allanby, who was delighted to have a chance of revenging herself on Elsie and her belongings. Blake avoided Elsie for the rest of the day.

The girl wondered why, and showed that she did not care, by flirting extravagantly with every man who came near her. She gave Frank Hallett no opportunity for a

tête-à-tête, and made Dominic Trant radiant by accepting his very pronounced attentions, with every sign of pleasure. It was Dominic Trant who sat next her at luncheon, and who mounted her again when luncheon was over. Dominic Trant was in high feather, for he had won two races, and expected to win several more.

The Luya Cup Race, the great event of the day, came after luncheon. Each horse was ridden by its owner, and most of the near stations and of the larger selections of the Luya were represented in the entrances. It was supposed that Frank Hallett would be the winner, on Gipsy Girl, but a good many backed Trant. Elsie wondered whether Blake intended to run Osman and to ride him. It was not till the last moment that she was certain. Just before the horses came into line he rode out on a beautiful black, which

was certainly Osman, only that equally certain Osman had no white star on his forehead. She remembered this distinctly. Blake looked very well in his crimson and black colours. He seemed a part of the horse, and the fiery creature answered to his touch as though there were a complete sympathy between them.

The race was an exciting one. Frank Hallett took the lead with Gipsy Girl, but half-way round Dominic Trant passed him. Blake followed close. The others were in a bunch, Lord Horace keeping up pretty well, but gradually slackening, and one or two very soon giving up altogether. Again Gipsy Girl got the lead. It was evident that Trant's horse was flagging, and that Blake was holding in. But a quarter of a mile from the winning post, the black shot forward. For a little way he and Gipsy Girl were neck and neck.

The pace was tremendous. Both men were bowed almost to the horses' necks. Gipsy Girl's sides were streaming, where Hallett had dug in his spurs. The black was scarcely blown. Close to the post he darted ahead, and Blake came in an easy winner.

There was a great deal of talk about the horse, which Elsie saw had been entered as Osman. As soon as the weighing and examination were over, his cloth was thrown on again, and Sam Shehan led him away from the course.

It was said that he had been stabled the night before in an old shepherd's hut across the river, and that Sam Shehan was so frightened of his being tampered with, that he and the half-castes had sat up all night to watch him.

When Blake came to the enclosure, where the Tunimbah ladies had mostly stationed

themselves, Elsie congratulated him very sweetly.

‘I feel a particular and personal interest in Osman,’ she said, ‘since it was through him that I first made your acquaintance. But I have been so puzzled. I felt certain that he had no white mark on his forehead. I remember thinking that he looked quite uncanny in his blackness.’

‘You must have forgotten,’ said Blake quietly, and presently left her to go and talk to Mrs. Jem Hallett.

‘I seem fated to receive your condolences on Mr. Blake’s victories,’ said Frank Hallett. ‘He is always the triumphant hero.’

He laughed as he spoke, but there was a shade of bitterness in his tone.

Elsie wore black and crimson that night. Lady Horace declared that people would think she did so on purpose, as a tribute to Blake,

the winner, and tried to persuade her to put on an old white gown instead. But Elsie would not. 'I did not know that they were Mr. Blake's colours,' she answered. 'And let people think what they like.'

Dinner to-night was in a tent in the courtyard, for the dance was to be a more important affair than on the previous evening, and the woolshed was being prepared as a ball-room. Frank Hallett was very busy, when the ladies came out into the verandah, superintending the placing of Chinese lanterns, which were hung upon the bunya trees, and marked the way to the woolshed. Frank came up to Elsie. 'Will you do something to please my mother? Will you let her see you in your ball dress? You know she never appears at this sort of thing.'

'Of course I will, and I will come at once, or after dinner—whichever she likes best.'

‘Then will you come now? For the dear old lady goes to bed at nine o’clock, and we shall not have got over the speeches by then.’

Elsie and he went out at the garden gate, and walked to old Mrs. Hallett’s cottage, which was on the brow of the hill, overlooking the lagoon, not a stone’s throw from the house. The old lady was in very feeble health, and lived the most retired life possible. She very rarely came to the big house, but Frank, who was devoted to his mother, spent the greater part of his evenings with her, and always lunched at the cottage when he was not out on the run. People watched them as they went across, and Elsie wondered what Blake would think, for she knew it would be said that this was a visit of an affianced pair. The thought made her cheeks burn, but gave her at the same time a little thrill of triumph, for she knew that Lady Garfit would be annoyed.

Mrs. Hallett was sitting in her verandah, looking at the sunset, which was gorgeous over Mount Luya, and watching the stir and bustle at the head station. She was a handsome old woman, with hard features and snow-white hair. She had a vacant smile, which contrasted oddly with her otherwise severe face. Her brain was weakened a little, and it was for this reason that she did not mix much with the world ; moreover, she was not fond of Mrs. Jem.

She stroked Elsie's dress, and looked at her with her blank smile, which was pathetic in its vacuity. 'You're a bonny creature,' she said. 'It's a pity you're so frivolous. I believe your sister is worth two of you.'

'Mother !' exclaimed Frank.

'But you're quite right, Mrs. Hallett,' said Elsie. 'Ina is worth a hundred of me.'

'It's a pity you let her marry that fliberty-

gibbet of a lord,' said Mrs. Hallett, 'but you've been badly brought up, and that's what I'm always telling Frank. I remember your mother quite well, when your father was alive, and scab inspector on the Luya. She was a pretty woman too, and you're like her ; but she hadn't a great deal of sense, and I think you take after her.'

'Really, Mrs. Hallett, I think it is very unkind of you to bring me here to scold me, and abuse my mother,' said Elsie with a laugh. 'But now, won't you forgive me, and wish me a merry evening? See, I've brought you a rose.'

The girl knelt down, and tendered her little offering with a bewitching humility, that made Frank Hallett adore her. 'The old lady doesn't mean a word of it,' he said, 'and you're an angel, Miss Valliant.'

'There are two kinds of angels,' said Mrs.

Hallett, 'and you're in Beelzebub's colours, my dear. But you look lovely all the same, and I don't wonder that all the men are running after you. That's what Lady Garfit tells me.'

'Oh, so the Garfits have been here to see you,' said Elsie piqued. 'Well, Rose Garfit is a practical and a substantial angel, and she ought to be just what you like.'

'So she is. I like her better than you, but then Frank doesn't, my love, and that's the mischief. Lady Garfit says you're a flirt, and that you are getting yourself talked about with those Baròlin men. Now just come here, and stoop down close. I want to see something.'

Elsie did as she told her. The old lady solemnly wiped her spectacles, and took out her handkerchief, and rubbed Elsie's rose-pink cheek.

'Lady Garfit says you're rouged.'

‘But you see that I’m not.’

‘There’s no telling. Rose Garfit—no, it was Minnie Pryde, or Mrs. Jem said it—some of you Leichardt’s Town girls crush up geranium leaves, and rub your cheeks with them, and it doesn’t come off on the handkerchief.’

‘I’ll go,’ cried Elsie rising. ‘And if I do rouge, and if I flirt, Mrs. Hallett, and if I’m horrid altogether, you’re well rid of me. And I’m going back to Leichardt’s Town very soon, and you won’t see me till the spring, when we are all coming up to picnic at Baròlin Falls, and perhaps by then you’ll have forgiven me.’

She kissed her hand and bounded off the verandah, pulling her cloak over her head. Frank followed, but he was detained for a few moments by his mother. Blake was waiting at the entrance of the tent, having

the start, and took Elsie into dinner, and Frank was vexed with his mother.

It was a long repast, made longer by the speeches. The health of Mr. and Mrs. Jem was drunk, and an appropriate speech was made by the oldest resident on the Luya, calling attention to the auspicious occasion, and wishing them a silver and a golden wedding. And there were many more toasts, and among them the health of Osman, winner of the Luya Cup; and the cup was filled with champagne, and handed from each to each, Blake himself drinking after Elsie's lips had touched the goblet.

‘I drink to our first meeting,’ said he in a low tone, audible only to her.

The lanterns were all alight when they left the tent, and the musicians had already struck up in the woolshed. It was a curious and fairy-like scene, the array of coloured

lamps, the solemn bunyas in the dimness of night, and in their density of foliage, almost like pyramids of green marble; the leaden lagoon reflecting the pale stars above and the red fires of the camp below, the shadowy expanse of plain, and the darker patches of scrub and bush, with the rugged mountain beyond—Luya—and the two needles of the Burrum, against the deep mysterious sky, dotted with its myriads of stars, and showing all the beautiful southern constellations. The moon had not risen yet, but its appearance could hardly add any greater glory to the night. Blake got Elsie a programme, and wrote his initials against various waltzes. Frank Hallett watched him doing this with envy and jealousy tearing at his heart. He was an outsider, one among the men who waited, as she stood on the steps of the woolshed, to ask her for a dance.

‘Please let me pass,’ said Lady Garfit sourly, as she convoyed her daughter. ‘Mr. Frank Hallett, I am sure you will give your arm to Rose. Miss Valliant’s would-be partners make quite a block in the gangway.’

There was a general clearance.

‘I beg your pardon,’ said Elsie innocently. ‘But you know, I can’t help people asking me to dance, can I?’

Lady Garfit did not vouchsafe a reply.

‘You must feel like a queen holding a court,’ said Trant, who had pushed his way close to her.

‘Oh!’ she exclaimed, ‘Lady Garfit makes me feel like a beggar-maid dressed up. No, Mr. Trant, you mustn’t put your name down so many times. Only once, please. I have promised to keep some for Mr. Frank Hallett.’

Trant’s eyes flamed. He left her sulkily.

When the time came for his dance, he did not appear to claim it, and Elsie danced it with Blake. Nor did he come to make apologies. Elsie would have been offended if she had not noticed that his eyes glowered upon her whenever she turned hers towards him, and his anger, she felt, was a tribute to her power.

Just then, however, when Frank returned, he was made almost happy by the radiant smile with which Elsie showed him the blanks.

Oh yes, it was a triumphant evening for vain Elsie. She was the belle of the room. Rose Garfit was nowhere, and Mrs. Allanby quite out in the cold.

The sense of conquest was intoxicating. All the men present whom she considered worth captivating she had reduced to abject subjection. Never in her life had she so

thoroughly enjoyed herself. Perhaps the enjoyment was all the more intense because there mingled with her triumph and elation a strange sense of dread, a certain vague pain and expectancy which gave a keener edge to life, and might have been the thrill of a new sense. And it was true. There were awakening in her sensations she had never known. It was as if she had now taken a plunge into new deep waters, when all her life she had been floating on a shallow sunlit stream.

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